



CAUSES & CONSEQUENCES OF TERRORISM



FROM FREEDOM FIGHTERS TO JIHADISTS

Human Resources of Non
State Armed Groups

Vera Mironova

From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists

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TERRORISM SERIES

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Vera Mironova

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From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists

*Human Resources of Non-State
Armed Groups*

Edited by

VERA MIRONOVA
Visiting Fellow, Harvard University

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of all the people who died on all sides of
the war in Iraq and Syria.*

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Preface

“10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . . 7 . . .”

An Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF) officer would count backward after sending the GPS coordinates for a target building to the aircraft circling above us. The countdown was the ten seconds it took for the building to disappear in a mushroom of dust and enemy fighters to disappear under the debris. Once that was done, we would move out of hiding and continue down the narrow streets of the Old City of Mosul, trying hard to be as quiet as possible; the enemy was hiding not only in the destroyed buildings on both sides, but often below in tunnels.

As we went, the soldiers casually stepped over the bloated bodies of enemy combatants in their signature uniforms complete with suicide belts. They had been left to rot there for weeks under the hot Iraqi sun, and occasionally someone would wonder out loud why those bodies were still there, like they were some kind of abandoned roadblocks. The soldiers considered these once-men solely as objects, but I didn't. I saw them from a different angle. These were not stones or fallen trees so inconveniently blocking the way. They used to be people, people who had made decisions in life that brought them to the spot where they lay.

At this point I, an academic, had been embedded with ISOF for ten months. I had begun my research on rebel fighters in the Middle East five years prior, and it had led me there, among their lives and deaths, and in close proximity to the organizations that facilitated both.

In life, those people had once been part of a feared rebel organization. They had fought, lived and trained in camps, reported to their chain of command, slept on bunkbeds in shifts, and ate in the dining hall on long plastic tables. They lived like those in any other similar institution, except for an Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) twist to some details, like a sign on the door of a camp I once visited. The sign could be roughly translated as, “Dear Brother Jihadists, for everything holy on this planet, please wash the dishes. God bless you.” That made me pause for a second. If fighters did not care about such a mundane thing as doing dishes (that the sign had to

almost beg them to wash), how hard was it to organize them to not only work but die for one goal?

After we had stormed one camp and military intelligence personnel collected everything they needed, I saw a book lying on the floor in the hallway. It was the *Book of Jihad*, a common propaganda book, written in Russian because many Russian-speaking men from the former Soviet Union joined ISIS to fight in Syria and Iraq and did not speak Arabic. It would never have caught my attention if not for a handwritten note on its cover that, in very direct prison slang, warned future readers not to steal it. Who would expect that people who had gone to Mosul to fight the ultimate war were in fact prone to stealing the *Book of Jihad* from each other? As comical as that was, it showed a glimpse of a much bigger problem that ISIS leaders faced—controlling thousands of different people. And based on the handwritten notes from the ISIS officer school that were lying next to the book, they were also not sure how to address it. “A group emir [leader] should know everything about his group members” was written in big letters in the notebook under the lecture title “Organization of Units,” including, in addition to biographic information, questions about individual character such as “self-esteem” and “goals in life.”

Visiting abandoned houses in Mosul provided me with pictures of ISIS members in their private lives. Sometime those pictures were literal. In one house, children had drawn European-style houses on the walls, maybe the houses of grandparents they missed. In another house, the refrigerator was decorated with quotes from an old TV advertisement. And among the things I expected to find in those partially destroyed buildings—military lectures, lists of equipment, religious literature—I also found a love poem, written in Russian from one of the foreign fighter’s wives:

We were made for each other
 Our marriage sealed in heaven. . . .
 When you left to Beiji
 I missed you enormously
 Counting the days we were apart
 Until finally, you came back. . . .
 For seven happy days
 that flew by like a second
 And you were gone again
 To a place of war

And even if you are gone forever
 I will be still counting days
 'Til we see each other again
 My beloved Zakhari.

I realized that Zakhari, his wife Umm Fatima (mother of Fatima), and even their daughter Fatima were most likely all dead by then, like so many in Mosul. But despite how people looked at them, they were not just dehumanized enemy combatants or terrorists; they were people who once had hopes and desires like everyone else, and, like everyone else, those hopes and desires had influenced their behavior.

There were other papers of interest laying in the stash of ISIS documents, and while the soldiers were obviously only interested in the military information, it was the poem and a recipe for a classic Eastern European cake, carefully written in the same notebook, that intrigued me most. It called for Russian condensed milk, and I couldn't imagine how they could ever find that milk in Mosul. That thought brought me again to the biggest piece of the ISIS puzzle, and the reason I was there in the midst of a bloody civil war—to study the lives, thoughts, and motives of the fighters, both local and foreign, who, sometimes selflessly and sometimes thoughtlessly, gave their lives. What chain of decisions had brought them to Mosul? How different were they from ordinary people? And most important, how did ISIS as an organization channel these people's decision-making process to transform them into productive members of the group?

When the Iraqi forces defeated ISIS in Mosul, I did an interview in a tiny Soviet-style studio apartment in an industrial town in Eastern Europe. Sitting across from me was Usama, a former ISIS fighter from North Caucasus. My first question caught him off guard: "How could you get Russian condensed milk in Mosul?" That quickly, Usama, the fearless jihadi fighter of ISIS propaganda, was gone, replaced with a young, lonely man named Ali (name changed), who told me how. In the midst of the war, his mother had come to Syria to check on him. She had stayed for a month, and the only thing she brought with her was food from home, including condensed milk. He was an ordinary person with an ordinary mother. It made me realize that, in addition to just managing those ordinary (at least in some ways) people, ISIS had to make them into the fighters that would be feared by so many.

Before Mosul, I had been interviewing fighters from many different Syrian rebel subgroups for five years when I realized it wasn't good enough.

I could hear what these men were saying, but without context, I felt my research would be incomplete. To truly understand, I had to feel what they felt and experience what they had experienced. So I took a year off from my academic job, bought a military-grade bulletproof vest, and moved to the battlefield full time despite the obvious dangers involved. In fact, my goal was to be in the same danger as the people fighting there.

For nearly a year I was embedded with several different armed groups, experiencing firsthand the conditions and environment rebel fighters made their decisions in, staying in smoke-filled safe houses on the frontline, sleeping on the floor among soldiers, and eating the same food they did. I begged Iraqi commanders to take me on every mission and forward operation. Despite being the first female ever in their military, they soon got used to me and, surprisingly, gave me permission to move freely with different units on the frontline. I even had the honor of being the only foreigner (and female) present when the Iraqi flag was planted on the remains of the famous al-Nuri Mosque, where ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had once declared the formation of the caliphate.

While embedded with Kurdish Peshmerga liberating villages around Mosul, I entered treacherous ISIS tunnels before they had even been swept of militants and explosives. With ISOF and Hasd Shabi (Shia militia) in the town, I'd been to ISIS training camps, weapons factories, bases, and safe houses. Many of those visits to militia outposts occurred right after fighters had either fled or been killed, their uneaten food and hot tea still on the table. I tried on a suicide belt abandoned by retreating fighters and sat in the driver's seat of an infamous "Mad Max"-style ISIS suicide car after it was captured, trying to get as close to what it felt like to be a driver going on his last mission.

Because I was in Mosul until the end of the operation, I also got to experience many things some of the rebel fighters did not, at least from my perspective. I was with soldiers as they pulled living ISIS members from beneath the rubble. Here I was even of some help, translating for wives of foreign fighters from Russian to Arabic. I visited houses ISIS had used as prisons while they were being liberated. I found an address book of ISIS fighters and traced people in it through Russian social media. I was with soldiers searching for ISIS militants hiding among civilians and doing interrogations in detention centers. After the operation was over, I was also in counterterrorism courts following investigations and attending the prosecutions of ISIS members.

This field research steeped me not only in the physical conditions fighters faced, but in their psyche. During operations, I sat in a Humvee while enemy bullets bounced against the car's armor. I was shot at not only by the enemy, but also by my own side. With snipers, I spent hours waiting on the roofs of houses, and days in the headquarters with Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs) coordinating airstrikes. I stayed on the base that was a main ISIS target. At night it was shelled with chemical weapons (although they missed by far), and during the day, the enemy tried hard to plant improvised explosive devices (IEDs) around us.

After the Mosul operation (and numerous heat strokes), I thought I had everything I needed for a book, so I came back home. But instead of sitting in a library and writing, I found myself talking to Ali, a former ISIS fighter from North Caucasus, about five hours a day, despite the inconvenient time difference (luckily, he did additional night prayer and was awake during Boston's day hours). He was bored and alone, waiting for his new fake documents (he had burned his own passport while in Syria, and his real name was known to Russian authorities), and was thrilled to talk with someone who was not afraid of him, would not call the police, and, more importantly, had shared his experiences. And since all of his ISIS comrades were dead, someone from the other side of the frontline was good enough.

I knew what he was talking about. While embedded with ISOF fighters, I had been in absolutely identical conditions as ISIS fighters, often with only a house wall between us. Ali and I had both breathed the same dusty, suffocating heat, sometimes thick with the chemical weapons. We had experienced similar life dangers. We even had both been in serious car crashes while in Mosul because driving fast and reckless was considered normal no matter which side you were on.

Ali and I also had a lot of other things in common from our pre-Iraq and Syria lives. Not only did we speak the same native language and hold Russian passports, we were also of similar age, grew up in middle-class families in Moscow, and had shared similar childhood experiences. We even had the Moscow State University computer science department in common, where I had studied and he had worked.

Yet his background and knowledge drove him to help ISIS with its technical tasks (including their drone program) while I used mine to understand the ISIS drone documents found in a makeshift drone factory in Mosul for a report published by the U.S. military. To me, this was the real draw to my communication with him. It made me want to understand him

better, not only for this book, but for my own curiosity. We were such similar people; how had our paths veered off in such different, actually opposite, directions?

I did not just want to interview Ali like I had everyone else. I wanted to understand him no matter how much time it took or how much potential interest the U.S. government could have in such a relationship. Our conversations covered everything from politics to childhood memories. By phone, he taught me how to fix a broken heater, and I explained how to care for the cat that regularly visited his balcony. When I would visit him, spending the whole day together from the first morning until the night prayer either walking around the city or eating homemade chicken soup and dates in his apartment, he would tell me the most personal parts of his experiences in Raqqa, Tabqa, Tal Afar, Sinjar, and Mosul. In some ways, he was like many of the fighters I had talked to over the previous five years. But I learned there was something else about him—something about his opinions that was very different, and more than a little disturbing.

By that point, I had gotten to know his whole family, the male part of which is now in Russian prison for supporting ISIS. Interestingly, they not only did *not* share many of Ali's opinions (particularly on religion) but privately referred to his religious beliefs as being simply crazy. It turned out that Ali's religious views were, in fact, much more radical than those of ISIS or any other armed group that had fought in the conflict. He belonged to a radical sect of chain *takfir*s, which is one of the most radical branches of Salafi Wahhabism to date; adherents believe that a person who does not accuse an apostate of heresy is an apostate himself. He had left ISIS only because ISIS was not radical enough. According to him, ISIS was not properly enforcing sharia law and had been too lenient with Syrian locals (whom he did not consider to be Muslims). For that matter, he did not even consider his own family members to be Muslims.

Compared to other former fighters and ISIS supporters, he also followed all the rules he believed in meticulously. For example, since he considered any interaction with the civilian (non-sharia) institutions prohibited, before installing any computer application he would carefully read its thirty pages of terms and conditions through Google translate to make sure that he did not click to accept it if there was any mention of solving potential disputes in court.

For half a year, I studied everything I could about his sect and their views. By that time, Ali trusted me and was eager to share religious ideas

that, in general, he tried to hide, realizing they would not be understood by most people. He taught me everything I wanted to know. He made a list of books and articles I had to read and added me to the sect's closed social media groups; some were as big as four thousand members, while others did not have more than three hundred members. He shared with me screenshots of his online chats with other sect members. He also shared group lectures with me and, in sum, I listened to approximately seventy hours of them. Although at no point did those lectures explicitly call for the use of weapons, the content of those materials was more radical than anything I had ever seen or heard in ISIS propaganda.

Getting so deep into their teachings and so close to some members of his family also put me into a very unexpected position. One time his father asked me, "Since Ali listens to you, can you please tell him to stop calling his mother *kafir* [infidel], because it really offends her, a devoted Muslim woman?" His mother, the only person in the family who was not having problems with the law and was still able to travel, would visit him from time to time, but the only thing Ali would do is try to convert her to his sect. Of course there was not much I could have done about it, but it raised another question about ISIS: If Ali's own family, whom he totally depends on for survival while he is in hiding, could do nothing about his religious dedication, how did ISIS as an organization manage people like him? To me, it seemed like a human resources problem that was almost impossible to solve.

My research for this book landed me far away from where I had begun—doing academic surveys of Syrian fighters to understand why they had joined the war. I would never have imagined it would take me to the frontlines of the biggest urban military operation since World War II, all over Europe and Central Asia to visit former ISIS foreign fighters in hiding, into prisons to visit ISIS defectors, and even into the bowels of an ultra-radical sect of Salafi Wahhabism. And though on finishing this book I have more questions than answers, I hope what I have gathered will shed at least some light on the goals and thoughts of the individuals, both local and abroad, who took up arms to fight, and how armed groups as organizations manage those people to make them the most effective in pursuing the goals the group was fighting for.

Acknowledgments

First of all I want to thank all of my research participants, many of whom are not alive anymore. And though some of those (members of ISIS) who lived are wanted by Interpol, I am very grateful for the hours, and sometimes days, they took to painstakingly explain different complicated religious and ideological concepts and relations inside their groups. As a teacher myself, I know for sure that I personally would not have the patience for a student as inquisitive as myself. Sometimes they even did it by phone from the battlefield, despite limited access to the internet and electricity. I am also extremely grateful, as the rest of the world, to all members of ISOF and other coalition forces for defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

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I especially want to thank Hadi Hamid for absolutely everything. There is nothing I could have done without his help.

I also learned a lot from ISOF leadership. From Gen. Abdul Wahab, I learned how important it is to be on the ground with soldiers. From Gen. Sami, I learned how important it is to stay in the headquarters and think. From Col. Arkan, I learned to pay attention to details and how to be a rock star, even in the middle of a total mess. I am so proud to know these people.

Also, this book would not have been possible without help from my colleagues from Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan:

Loubna Mrie, who from the very beginning of the conflict in Syria, and despite the obvious dangers and loss of many colleagues, continued to work

on the frontlines in Aleppo and Idlib and with different groups from moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA) to ISIS. Her incredible intelligence enabled her to navigate different frontlines in work so brave, it was sometimes scary.

Karam Al Hamad, who not only followed Syrian armed groups in their battles, he also (unfortunately) experienced the Assad prison system personally. For a year, he was imprisoned in a so-called Palestinian Branch prison in Damascus. However, even the torture he endured did not stop his dedication to understand the conflict and share it with the outside world. Despite being wanted by both the Assad regime and ISIS, he continued working in one of the most dangerous areas of Syria (Deir Ezzor) until the last possible moment. Later he moved abroad, and even there he worked with local activists despite getting death threats from ISIS on a weekly basis.

Ekaterina Sergatskova, who helped me navigate a world even more complicated than the war zone—the underground of foreign fighters in hiding and group supporters all over Europe. She conducted interviews in the most obscure places and under the greatest secrecy possible, and often retrieved information just before subjects were imprisoned or assassinated.

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Although it is popular to blame everything on ISIS (and often ISIS is happy to take the credit), I have to admit that any mistakes in this book are only mine.

Introduction

As of the first part of 2018, the Syrian civil war is the bloodiest ongoing conflict in the world, and the many attempts to bring the struggle to an end have been ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. One central reason this war has been so protracted is the number of armed factions involved. As the American Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, commented in 2013, “Syria is not about choosing between two sides, but rather about choosing one among many sides.”

This multifactional front is a growing military trend in conflicts. Two-thirds of all civil wars between 1989 and 2003 involved more than one rebel group fighting against the government,¹ and since that time, the number of armed groups per civil war is constantly increasing. Moreover, while proxy wars were still mostly waged along a frontline in the late twentieth century, now foreign countries often support different factions fighting on the same side, making civil conflicts complex, two-level proxy wars.

Although all groups participating in civil wars are fighting to maximize their share of power,² they often differ in their ideologies. The ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Ukraine all involve groups of different ideologies, ranging from pro-democracy units to Islamist groups (such as in the Middle East) and from pro-West units to World War II-style, neo-Nazi groups (such as in Ukraine). With very few exceptions, radical groups become some of the strongest. Why those particular groups were able to rapidly increase in power and size while others simply disappeared is a puzzle that requires an explanation.

This additional layer of complexity makes managing such conflicts especially challenging for foreign governments and international organizations. Previously, it was sufficient to choose one side of the conflict to support

¹ UCDP/PRIO.

² U.S. Army and Marine Corps, *The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

(government or opposition), but it is now equally important to determine which opposition group will take control if the government is defeated.

In their efforts to resolve conflicts, foreign governments and the international community that choose to support the opposition have to simultaneously work on two dimensions: managing relative powers between enemies and the power dynamics inside the rebel bloc. On one hand, they are trying to aid the fight against the government, and on the other, they are supporting moderate rebel groups while weakening more radical ones.

And although academics and policymakers have accumulated a substantial body of knowledge about the interaction between groups fighting on opposite sides of the frontline, the internal dynamics between rebel factions and, more specifically, the role ideology plays in these dynamics is not understood as well, which makes choosing a group to support a dangerous guessing game. And although virtually all ongoing conflicts have more than one group fighting on the rebel side, the confusion about such multifactional wars is so apparent that there is no consensus among government policymakers on how to even approach this problem on the group or individual fighter level.

In 2015, for example, the Obama administration vetted individual fighters who wanted to join U.S.-backed rebel groups in Syria so as to screen out people likely to switch to radical groups after receiving training and weapons. At the same time, the United States officially blacklisted a particular armed group in Ukraine—accused of being ultra-nationalist or even neo-fascist—from receiving U.S.-sponsored training, equipment, or any other support. So, while the United States was trying to work with individual fighters to prevent them from joining radical armed groups in Syria, the United States was also supporting anti-Russian fighting on the group level by refusing to give support to a particular group without looking at its existing and potential members.

This inconsistent approach to rebel groups is not surprising since every group ideology and membership taken together is interdependent, complex, and difficult to untangle. Yet it is impossible for governments to design effective policies to either defeat or empower a group without understanding these internal dynamics. And while previous research has looked at this problem from militaristic or religious points of view, my goal is to contribute to understanding how internal competition between rebel factions works and what makes a rebel group successful. I will do this by employing labor market theory and comparing, among other important factors, the

human resource policies of different groups. This entails looking at not only the groups, but also the individual fighters.

It is difficult to understand the factions inside rebel forces without understanding the group's human resources; no armed group can be successful without qualified manpower. Therefore, groups fighting for the same goal within a rebel bloc are also competing for the same potential members, and it is a group's policies that determine its recruiting, and ultimately its overall, success. In understanding which policies are successful, it is also important to understand the fighters these groups recruit. First, what decision-making process leads prospective fighters to take up arms? And then, once they choose to fight, how do they choose a group to fight with?

In this book, I will explain what I have discovered about different fighters' rational decision-making processes, step by step. I show that after the initial decision to take up arms (which is based on individual grievances), fighters view armed groups (fighting for the goal they are interested in) as institutions and make the decision to join or switch groups by comparing their organizational capabilities. The groups that are the best organized internally, have less corruption, and provide more for their members become the most popular with fighters.

At the same time, once a group becomes popular (its supply of potential fighters exceeds group demand), it is in danger of decreasing the quality of its manpower. In this case, adopting strict rules grounded in an ideology ensures that only the most dedicated people are in its ranks. Individuals joining for reasons other than dedication to the group's goal will think twice before joining because membership requires a great deal of individual sacrifices.

However, one side effect of using ideology as a screening mechanism is attracting people more interested in ideology than in the actual goal of the group: power. Not only do those people waste group resources, but their presence is dangerous and leads to internal conflicts. So to be the most effective, a group has to strike a delicate balance between using ideology as a screening mechanism and preventing it from attracting fighters who negatively affect a group's military and political strategies.

I illustrate my theory with data based on more than 600 interviews and a focus group conducted with local and foreign members of different armed groups on the Syrian frontlines—ranging from the moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA) to an al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS)—and a dataset of human resource policies

from forty armed groups based on qualitative interviews with group leaders. I also conducted in-depth interviews with members of an ultra-radical sect inside of ISIS, who are currently in hiding.

Most previous evidence in insurgency violence literature is post hoc, relying on retrospective interviews of survivors or an individual fighter's online footprint. My data, drawn from in-person surveys and interviews on the frontlines of the ongoing conflict, affords information gathered in near real-time, avoids survivorship bias, and also sheds light on the intentions of fighters in making particular decisions. My year embedded with Iraqi Special Operations Forces for the Mosul Operation against ISIS allowed me to further confirm these findings through ethnographic research.

Increasing Fractionalization

Why are current civil wars so fractionalized? The increasing availability of new communication technologies, especially the internet, makes it much easier and less costly for prospective leaders to organize their own groups. Previously, it was all but required for armed groups to secure assistance from foreign governments or other major international actors if they were to have any hope of organizing an armed rebellion culminating in victory. To obtain adequate funding, information, training, and weapons, prospective leaders had to have powerful foreign patrons who would sponsor them with weapons, cash, and military advisers. Even if a group managed to acquire natural resources and use them to fund its activities, it still needed support from those outside contacts to grow from being a small, marginal gang to being powerful enough to overthrow a government and win international recognition.

Revenue generated from natural resources alone was rarely sufficient to buy expertise, information, and foreign public support; and even if it could, these goods were very expensive. Armed groups needed substantial startup capital and networks from the very onset of the conflict. In industrial organization language, barriers to entry into such a market—a territory where different rebel groups operate and compete—were very high, ensuring that nongovernmental armed groups had a monopoly, or at bare minimum an oligopoly. One or a small number of rebel groups were already challenging the government, and there was no easy way for another group to enter. With this setup, the small number of groups already operating had the monopoly

on funding and support from interested government and international actors. Internally, they also had fewer manpower problems. The small number of groups (often just one) meant prospective fighters who wanted to join the rebellion had few (or one) options.

Even as late as the 1990s, for example during the Yugoslavian wars, only a few political umbrella organizations managed the several semiautonomous groups on their respective sides (Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian). All Serbian militias depended on Belgrade for money, supplies, and political connections; Croatian groups went to Zagreb for everything they needed; and all Bosnian groups were in constant contact with Sarajevo. Only the leadership of the respective political parties went to foreign countries to establish contacts with international actors and diasporas to raise funds. As a result, new groups could not easily organize without direct connections to existing political leadership and their organizations. Likewise, an existing armed group could not easily break ties with its leadership without losing sources of funding and supplies. To break with a political umbrella organization was costly in terms of time, funds, and supplies of materiel. Armed groups had few options if they were dissatisfied with their political umbrella organization. Potential foreign supporters were also reluctant to enter the armed conflict by funding autonomous armed groups, calculating that their chance of succeeding was too low. Therefore, serious independent groups had little chance of developing.

In the twenty-first century, however, that situation has changed dramatically. The 2008 U.S. Army counterinsurgency manual warns, “Interconnectedness and information technology are new aspects of this contemporary wave of insurgencies. Using the Internet, insurgents can now link virtually with allied groups throughout a state, a region, and even the entire world.”³

With the increased availability of communications technologies, particularly the internet, connections between like-minded people are much easier. Potential leaders can now organize armed groups from anywhere using only their laptops and at a negligible cost. Theoretically, anyone can connect with anyone anywhere else in the world in a matter of seconds, so little stops potential leaders from directly connecting to outside support rather than working under the aegis of umbrella organizations. There is no longer a need

³ Ibid.

to spend several years touring diasporas in foreign countries and capitals to figure out who is willing to support a political goal. With the internet, potential leaders can find like-minded individuals through social media, get information on weapons technology by watching YouTube videos, exchange intelligence through encrypted messengers, organize fundraising and collect money from interested private individuals on internet forums, use secure online chats to get in contact with foreign military advisers who have combat experience, organize weapons shipments via special dark websites, lobby through foreign media by sending op-eds directly to newspaper editors, or even run their own media organization. There is no longer a need for significant startup capital or a powerful third party to organize all of this from the very beginning of a group's existence. It is now much faster and far less expensive; even a potential leader with no civil war experience can do it.

This situation could be productively viewed through the lens of economics-based industrial organization theory, which is applied to evaluate the behavior of companies in a particular industry. Due to the reduction of communication costs and developments in communication technology, the cost of entry⁴ is now substantially less than what it used to be, which has induced more people to start groups and struggle for power. As a result, multiple similar groups materialize on the same side, which leads to a significant increase in competition between them. In industrial organization theory, it would be said that all combatant groups offer a near-identical product (they are fighting for the same goal) and that, in the beginning at least, all of them have a relatively small market share, and there is no dominant group. All groups are of similar size and have equal power; complete information is available about what groups are fighting for and how they differ; and the industry is characterized by freedom of entry and exit—groups can organize and disband freely.

The Puzzle

Although almost all contemporary civil wars start with a large number of independent groups, throughout the course of these wars, the total number

⁴ Carl Christian von Weizsacker, "A Welfare Analysis of Barriers to Entry," *Bell Journal of Economics* 11, no. 2 (1980): 399–420. Weizsacker defines a barrier to entry as "a cost of production that must be borne by a firm which seeks to enter an industry but is not borne by firms already in the industry."

of groups dwindles, leaving surviving groups to consolidate their power. Many groups announced their formation and foundation, then did not last long, and often, the few groups that increased their power at the expense of others espoused radical ideology. Why those particular groups were able to rapidly increase in power and size while others simply disappeared is a puzzle that requires an explanation.

At the outset of Ukraine's conflict with Russia in 2014, there were at least several dozen different armed groups fighting alongside the Ukrainian national army. But over time, several main groups, often accused of being neo-Nazi, consolidated more and more power. A similar situation happened in Syria. In March 2011, in the wake of the Arab Spring, violence broke out in Syria in response to a grassroots revolutionary movement to oust President Bashar al-Assad from power.⁵ In fact, there were so many groups that their names were often repeated, so that in addition to a name, a geographic area was needed to identify a particular group.

Similar to startup civilian companies, each group had some initial capital sufficient to buy weapons (which were easily available, and anyone interested could have purchased them) and all other necessities. Leaders of the groups were using the internet to recruit potential members and to get in contact with rich private individuals willing to sponsor their groups. Groups advertised internationally with semiprofessional announcement videos uploaded to YouTube. One group even went so far as to directly send op-eds to the *Washington Post* and *Daily Telegraph* stating their position.

But four years into the war, the rebel bloc looked nothing like it had in the beginning. Like Google and Amazon dominating the world IT market, several leading Islamist groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, were dominating the rebellion, and the majority of the original groups had disbanded. ISIS was also dominating, but it was fighting for a different goal. In short, while the conflict had started with many small to moderate groups (forty to two hundred people), within a few years, the rebel bloc had come to be represented by a small number of large groups (20,000 people). And the groups that were left were not only fighting under Islamist flags, but they were also the most radical ones and were classified as terrorist organizations by most Western countries.

⁵ Mark Hosenball and Phil Stewart, "John Kerry Statements About Syrian Rebels Remain at Odds with Intelligence Reports," Reuters, Nov. 5, 2013.

So the main questions become about the groups as organizations: What makes particular armed groups powerful inside the rebel bloc? How they are able to attract and retain the most qualified members? How do they make their fighters the most effective in combat? And what role does ideology play in the human resource policies of armed groups?

Why Study Armed Groups' Human Resources?

By definition, an “armed group” is a group of armed individuals that threatens or uses violence to achieve its goals.⁶ And while a significant body of academic and policy research is looking at the “violence” part of the definition, trying to understand why and how groups engage in violence, the human, “group” part of it often receives less attention—even though without the humans, there is no group (and, as a result, no one to conduct those acts of violence). As for the success of an armed group in achieving its goals, not only does the quantity and quality of individuals in the group matter, so does the group’s human resource policies, because this is how a group makes the best use of individuals.

A new opposition group, Mahgerin al-Allah, began in the Syrian town of Deir Ezzor in 2011. In order to attract funding, group members decided to increase their visibility. “The first thing I did when I took this job,” explained one group member who worked on the effort, “was to make a YouTube video about the group. I asked group leaders to gather as many people as they could (it did not matter if they were actually part of the group) to show how big the group was; bring all the weapons and cars they had (it did not matter if they worked or not) to show that they were well equipped; and wear uniforms and stand in military formation. I just had to show that they were professional.” A leader in the group also read a short script clarifying its goals. This promotional video was successful; the group received outside funding from a wealthy Syrian living in the Gulf. According to their communications officer, three aspects of the video attracted this donor’s attention: the leader of Mahgerin al-Allah was literate, because he was able to read the speech (signals leadership qualification); there was a large number

⁶ Claudia Hofmann and Ulrich Schneckener, “Engaging Non-state Armed Actors in State and Peace-Building: Options and Strategies,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 93 (September 2011): 883.

of people in the group (signals manpower quantity); and the members appeared professional, wearing uniforms and carrying weapons (signals manpower quality).

Why were those three group characteristics important to communicate? According to military literature, military effectiveness is the outcome of resources provided to a military group and its ability to transform these resources into effective combat capability. Simply put, what does a group have and how successfully can the group use it in combat?

Military capability depends on five resources: (1) funding; (2) manpower; (3) military infrastructure (training ranges, medical facilities, military construction projects, and the like); (4) combat research institutions; and (5) the defense industrial base.⁷ Since groups engaged in civil wars are usually startup armed groups fighting in fragile and undeveloped countries like Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, it could be assumed that at the beginning of their existence they have similar, and often rather minimal, technological development. Since they do not have any combat research or defense industrial base, and even their military infrastructure, usually limited to camps, is rather basic, the resources groups are left mostly to rely on (and competing with each other for) are money and manpower.

In addition to acquiring fighters and money, effective military organizations should be able to convert these resources into operational capabilities. In order for that to happen, developing the following is most important: (1) strategy; (2) civil-to-military relations; (3) military-to-military relations; (4) doctrine and organization within the force; and (5) capacity for innovation.⁸ Most of those organizational characteristics are developed at the executive leadership level, making the quality of those policies a function of the leadership's qualification and experience (manpower on the executive level).

If the source of manpower is clear, where does funding for the armed groups come from? Unlike state armed forces, there is no military budget allocated to them each year. Groups need to constantly raise funds to acquire the money necessary for their survival. This also makes securing funds a function of manpower, further confirming that human resources

⁷ Ashley J. Tellis, *Measuring National Power in the Postindustrial Age*, vol. 1110 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001).

⁸ *Ibid.*

is the single most important asset for any armed group participating in a civil war.

The more popular among prospective fighters a group is, the bigger and more effective the group, and, as a result, the more power it gets. Big groups with better and more dedicated fighters are more successful on the battlefield, and they will also get more money from foreign patrons interested in supporting dominant groups (the number of fighters sends them a good signal in such a noisy environment as civil war). These groups also have a higher chance of securing control of natural resources (if they exist in the country).

The quality (knowledge and experience) of human resources is also important for groups trying to advance their military infrastructure and industrial base. For example, without members with specialized technical knowledge, groups could not develop new weapons (such as drones and chemical weapons) or have advanced medical facilities.

If the quantity and quality of fighters on the ground level is a crucial resource that groups are competing for, leadership quality is what transforms this resource into war-fighting capability. This makes manpower on both lower and leadership levels a cornerstone of any armed group. Because of that, advancing within the civil war market and increasing power means competition for prospective fighters becomes a crucial issue. And while some groups attract and maintain dedicated prospective members, grow in size, and achieve success on the battlefield, others lose their members to competing groups, do not perform well in combat, and eventually have to disband.

Contribution to the Literature

My goal with this book is to contribute to the understanding of how competition between different rebel factions works and what makes some rebel groups more powerful than others by analyzing the situation using labor market theory, and so I am speaking to the literature on internal organization of armed groups. Even though it is an important reason for the failure of some groups and the success of others, there is still not enough academic work on the subject beyond individual-level case studies.

Recent research, however, has started paying more attention to the internal structure of rebel movements through comparative analyses, a

very important step toward understanding violent non-state actors' internal organization and human resources. In his book, Jacob Shapiro shows that one of the main difficulties armed groups struggle with is their human resources.⁹ Jeremy Weinstein, in comparing leading insurgency groups in different countries, looks at why some rebellions are ideologically motivated, while others are more oriented toward immediate profit, and how it affects recruitment.¹⁰ According to his argument, a group either enjoys resources and is consumption-oriented or is ideologically motivated with limited resources, and a group's recruitment strategy depends on this classification. This is a fundamental insight, but existing literature does not answer the question of *why* groups fighting in the same civil war, on the same side, with similar access to funding and resources, differ on the ideological and resources spectrum. This pattern is true in the oil-rich Middle East, where armed groups range from profit-oriented gangs, to ideological pro-democracy groups, to groups with the most extreme ideologies in world history. At the same time, Eli Berman shows the importance of extreme ideology for armed group cohesion.¹¹ I take this line of research further and look not only at how groups solve particular human resource problems related to recruitment, retention, and turnover, but also at how they operationalize radical ideology for that purpose and the dangerous side effects of using extreme ideology that way.

I also contribute to the growing literature on individual decision making on civil war participation. Since increasing fractionalization is a relatively new phenomenon, not a lot of studies look at how it affects fighters' behavior.

On one hand, research looks at the first step prospective fighters take, answering the question, "What makes individuals take up weapons?" For example, organizers of rebellions use three principal ways to recruit soldiers: forced recruitment,¹² offering immediate material incentives or

⁹ Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

¹² Bernd Beber and Christopher Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (2013): 65–104, and Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M.

promising such benefits in the future,¹³ or appealing to the fighters' sense of grievance.¹⁴ It has also been shown that relative deprivation,¹⁵ in-group ties and bonds,¹⁶ out-group aversions,¹⁷ the desire to improve one's social status,¹⁸ the relative danger of remaining a civilian,¹⁹ social networks,²⁰ and even simple boredom²¹ drive people to mobilize for violence.

On the other hand, a significant body of existing literature looks at the last step in a fighter's involvement in a civil war—what makes people quit and leave the armed group.²² Oppenheim et al. show that individuals who joined for ideological reasons are more likely to demobilize when their group deviates from its ideological precepts; and opportunities for looting decrease economically motivated combatants' odds of defection.²³

Missing from the existing literature is an analysis of the middle stage in a fighter's calculus; that is, choosing which group to fight with. Although the previous generation of civil wars (conflicts with one or a small number of rebel groups) did not have this problem, the currently increasing number of rebel factions fighting for the same goal

Weinstein, "Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (2008): 436–455.

¹³ Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, second printing with new preface and appendix (Harvard Economic Studies). Retrieved September 15 (1971): 2015.

¹⁴ Humphreys and Weinstein, "Who Fights?"

¹⁵ Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).

¹⁶ Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, [1985] 2000).

¹⁷ Roger D. Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Also *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001) by the same author.

¹⁸ Max Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (2008): 78–105.

¹⁹ Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew Adam Kocher, "How 'Free' Is Free Riding in Civil Wars? Violence, Insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem," *World Politics* 59, no. 02 (2007): 177–216.

²⁰ Roger D. Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

²¹ Enzo Nussio and Juan E. Ugarriza, "Are Insurgents Any Different from Counterinsurgents? A Systematic Integration and Validation of Motivational Studies from Colombia." *A Systematic Integration and Validation of Motivational Studies from Colombia* (August 16, 2013). *Forthcoming in Análisis Político* (2013).

²² Humphreys and Weinstein, "Who Fights?"; Michael J. Gilligan, Eric N. Mvukiyehe, and Cyrus Samii, "Reintegrating Rebels into Civilian Life: Quasi-experimental Evidence from Burundi," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57, no. 4 (2013): 598–626; Ben Oppenheim, Abbey Steele, Juan F. Vargas, and Michael Weintraub, "True Believers, Deserters, and Traitors: Who Leaves Insurgent Groups and Why," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 794–823.

²³ Oppenheim et al., "Who Leaves Insurgent Groups and Why?"

has potentially made this decision the hardest one a fighter must make. Scholars of the previous generation's wars looked at how fighters chose a side to fight with²⁴ and why some fighters switched sides, defecting to the (formally) opposing group,²⁵ but there is still little research on those switching between groups on the same side. And without clear understanding of this crucial step in a fighter's decision making, it is impossible to understand what causes some groups to gain power within the rebel bloc at the expense of others.

Finally, while the majority of previous research looks at local fighters, it is impossible to ignore the growing role of foreign fighters in civil conflicts. In this book, I also contribute to the literature by looking at the labor market for foreign fighters that some armed groups choose to employ. Hegghammer,²⁶ Malet,²⁷ and Bakke²⁸ all shed light on recruitment of foreigners and their motivation for joining, but I will look beyond that to how these fighters choose a group and why some quit and leave. Also, to portray the whole picture of a foreign fighter's participation in civil conflicts, I will look not only at benefits but also at problems such fighters bring to the armed groups, and the groups' policies toward this relatively understudied type of military labor force.

Argument

Attracting and retaining the best possible members is an important victory for a group, and it leads to an increase in share of power. Although

²⁴ Ana M. Arjona and Stathis N. Kalyvas, *Recruitment into Armed Groups in Colombia: A Survey of Demobilized Fighters* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Juan E. Ugarriza and Matthew J. Craig, "The Relevance of Ideology to Contemporary Armed Conflicts: A Quantitative Analysis of Former Combatants in Colombia," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57, no. 3 (2013): 445–477.

²⁵ Kalyvas and Kocher, "Free Riding," 177–216; Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (London: Blackwell, 1999); Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Måns Söderbom, "On the Duration of Civil War," *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (2004): 253–273; John Mueller, "The Banality of 'Ethnic War,'" *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 42–70; Oppenheim et al., "Who Leaves Insurgent Groups and Why," 794–823; Paul Staniland, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-state Paramilitaries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (2012): 16–40.

²⁶ Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010): 53–94.

²⁷ David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 43–53.

²⁸ Kristin Bakke, "Help Wanted? The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies," *International Security* 38, no. 4 (Spring 2014): 150–187.

the dynamics of the conflict are important, the internal organization of the armed groups themselves also plays a major role in the rebels' labor market. After the initial decision to take up arms, which is based on personal grievances, a fighter looks at armed groups as institutions that could enable him to be the most effective fighter. He then decides to join a group (or switch groups) based on their organizational structure and capabilities. Essentially, fighters are asking themselves which group it is more convenient to be a member of, which group is going to help them realize their goals, and which group will make the best use of their skills. And so for a rebel group to become the most popular group among prospective fighters, it should be conducting the most important military operations, be able to provide its members with everything necessary (such as food, weapons, and medical care), and be able to make the best use of them.

Yet, just as all groups are not equal in a fighter's eyes, not all fighters are equal from a group's point of view. Any group who wants to maximize its successes needs at least a core group of highly committed fighters. Rebels interested only in immediate monetary rewards will not risk their lives on the frontlines. They will try to optimize their cost-benefit calculations by reducing the danger they expose themselves to while increasing the immediate profit they expect to get. As a result, they will be more interested in looting than in actually fighting, and will not want to participate in dangerous battles. Such members not only drain groups' limited resources, fight poorly, and are more likely to disobey orders, but they also destroy group cohesion in general, which then reduces group combat readiness and turns away dedicated prospective fighters.

So when a group increases its funding and becomes popular (the supply of fighters exceeds group demand), it is in danger of decreasing the quality of its manpower and conversion capability—the ability to convert resources in order to increase the quality of the force. The wealthier and the better organized the group is, the more problematic this issue becomes. It is crucial for such groups to ensure they do not have a high proportion of fighters who are mostly interested in immediate profit, and that a majority of their members are dedicated to their goal. Adopting strict rules grounded in ideology, which is very only mildly, if at all, correlated with the goal of the group, helps the group ensure that only dedicated people are in its ranks.

As previously shown by the works of Iannaccone and Berman, radical ideology and a strict set of concordant internal rules allow a group not only to screen prospective members, but also to ensure that only the most

dedicated fighters remain in the group.²⁹ Individuals who are considering a group for reasons other than dedication to the goal will think twice before joining such a group because it requires a great deal of individual sacrifice. However, such strict rules will not turn away dedicated fighters. For them, those additional sacrifices are a small price to pay for possibly achieving their goal of fighting in a group that will best help them realize their potential. Their sole interest is being the most productive fighter, and they are willing to undergo any sacrifices for that opportunity.

In looking to recruit the most dedicated fighters, groups have an incentive to turn to foreigners. Foreign fighters' participation in a conflict is much more costly than it is for their local comrades, which signals their dedication.

In addition, having foreigners could improve fundraising; foreigners often possess knowledge not available among locals and could be used for propaganda, which further benefits the group. Managing foreign fighters, however, can also be challenging for a group. Their goals are often different from those of local group members, and this problem could potentially lead to internal conflicts and a struggle for power.

The most important factor in developing successful human resource policies (and other strategies for the group's development) is qualified leadership. Some groups have leaders with previous civil war experience, but most others have to gain this experience the hard way. Many groups are not able to survive this learning period, to say nothing of becoming competitive. Moreover, dedicated midlevel leaders are needed to execute those strategies. To be able to develop and follow effective internal policies, a group should be willing (and able) to select and promote the most competent and dedicated people. These are people who are dedicated not only to the goal of the war, but also to the group, something that was not important during the previous generation of civil conflicts. For leaders coming up through the ranks, such dedication could also be signaled by voluntarily following an even stricter-than-required set of rules related to a group's official ideology. That makes adopting a radical ideology (and, most importantly, the restrictions stemming from it) even more crucial for successful

²⁹ Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Why Strict Churches Are Strong," *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1180–1211; Laurence R. Iannaccone and Eli Berman, "Religious Extremism: The Good, the Bad, and the Deadly," *Public Choice* 128, no. 1 (2006): 109–129; Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent*.

groups in current multifactional conflicts, where signaling dedication to the group is one of the prerequisites for promotion.

As mentioned before, one potential negative side effect of using ideology that way could be attracting people more interested in ideology itself than in the goal of the war, because those people could waste group resources, try to challenge leadership, discredit the group's version of the ideology, become generally disappointed in the group, and, as a result, become spies or even sabotage the group from inside. So to be the most effective, a group has to find a balance between using ideology only as a screening mechanism and preventing it from affecting the group's military and political strategies.

While being effectively organized allows groups to win the competition for human resources—their most important resource—the right use of ideology ensures the *quality* of those human resources. As a result, well-organized groups are more likely to look like the most ideological. Such groups usually not only become some of the strongest in the rebel bloc—they are able to attract the largest number of the most qualified fighters and promote the most dedicated people to the leadership positions—but they also have a real chance to defeat the enemy because their development phase forced them to become effectively organized and competent.

On the other hand, if well-organized groups are not able to wield their ideology correctly, they will attract people who see ideology as an end goal of the war. This in turn may lead to problems like rebellion against group leadership and infighting within the group, both issues that will eventually lead to a decrease in military capabilities and, ultimately, decline and defeat.

Gathering Evidence

The majority of studies looking at armed groups unintentionally select one dependent variable; they analyze groups that were relatively large, enjoyed at least some success on the battlefield, and had been operating for a significant amount of time. This is understandable because most rebel groups get media and scholarly attention only after they acquire some share of power and become major players on the battlefield. Logistically, it is very hard to study groups that were less successful and, as a result, not as important. This is especially true for retrospective studies because people tend to forget less important details like the groups that did not accomplish anything significant or existed only briefly after major civil wars. To avoid falling into this

trap, I tracked groups and fighters from the very beginning of the conflict, following them as it unfolded. This allowed me to not only look at groups that were successful, were powerful, and had a large member base, but also at groups that operated for only a short time and did not accumulate any substantial power. Such a continuous approach, as opposed to a snapshot study, allowed me to track a group's development, looking at how it was organized from the beginning to the end (for some that disbanded) to see why that happened; or in the case of still-existing groups, up until the major foreign intervention in 2015. This approach allowed me to detect the precise moment when some groups gained momentum and started rapidly growing more powerful while others went bankrupt—the tipping point when almost perfect market competition started moving toward oligopoly and why. Developed relationships with members and leaders of some groups made it possible to interview them over time to see changes in their internal dynamics.

Most evidence in the insurgency violence literature relies on retrospective interviews. Although retrospective studies conducted over an extended period of time could possibly allow for greater clarity of motivations, especially in environments where people would be afraid to talk to a researcher,³⁰ research on the psychology of memory suggests that retrospective studies may also be prone to “moral rationalizations,” where conflict outcomes alter one's perceptions of prior motives and beliefs.³¹ Furthermore, studies have shown that information and experiences that occur after an event can influence how people recall the event and color their emotional memories.³² Phenomena such as collective memory (i.e., “the representation of the past embodied in both historical evidence and commemorative symbolism”³³) can also bias people's recollections of critical decisions.³⁴

³⁰ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³¹ Jo-Ann Tsang, “Moral Rationalization and the Integration of Situational Factors and Processes in Immoral Behavior,” *Review of General Psychology* 6, no. 1 (2002): 25–50.

³² Frederic Charles Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1932); Elizabeth F. Loftus, “When a Lie Becomes Memory's Truth: Memory Distortion After Exposure to Misinformation,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 1 (1992): 121–123; Linda J. Levine, “Reconstructing Memory for Emotions,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 126, no. 2 (1997): 165; Martin A. Safer, Linda J. Levine, and Amy L. Drapalski, “Distortion in Memory for Emotions: The Contributions of Personality and Post-event Knowledge,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28, no. 11 (2002): 1495–1507.

³³ Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

³⁴ Celia B. Harris, Helen M. Paterson, and Richard I. Kemp, “Collaborative Recall and Collective Memory: What Happens When We Remember Together?” *Memory* 16, no. 3 (2008): 213–230.

Throughout more than six years of conflict, my continuous feed of information on the groups and the trust established with them provided me an opportunity to conduct surveys on an individual level at different times and with different population subgroups. As part of the broader “Voices of Syria” project (with Sam Whitt and Loubna Mrie), more than six hundred refugees, civilians, and fighters were surveyed on how they self-selected into those roles. This allowed me to see when and why people made particular decisions. The data on individuals drawn from surveys and interviews with fighters and civilians on the frontlines of the conflict allowed me to get information as close as possible to the time of the decision making.

In addition, retrospective studies also negatively impact individual-level research. When these studies are conducted in the aftermath of an especially protracted, brutal civil war, there is an obvious selection bias for survivors, and it is not clear how people who survived differ from those who did not. For example, fighters who chose to fight in the most active combat zones are killed in disproportionate numbers and are therefore minimally present in such studies. Conducting surveys for four years of conflict on frontlines of varying intensity allowed me to reach as many respondents as possible, people who would no longer be alive after the conflict was over. It is very likely that many, if not most, of the fighters and civilians surveyed and interviewed for the study are no longer alive.

While acknowledging all the challenges and ultimately limitations of the survey research, I attempt to capture a broader range of subgroups: active and former rebel fighters, fighters from disparate groups, civilians in combat zones, and refugees in refugee camps. Such a multigroup approach allowed me to compare marginal differences between those people at a time when they were still determining their respective roles in the conflict.

As with any survey and interview, there is a possibility that respondents were not honest with their answers. I do not think, however, that this problem was any more significant in this project than in any other study in conflict zones. Participants knew that the research assistants had permission to conduct the survey from the group that was in control of the territory at that moment. The majority of the survey questions were behavioral in nature, touching on issues that people could openly discuss in public, and there were almost no questions that could be considered intelligence gathering.³⁵

³⁵ If there were any questions that made participants uncomfortable from the outset, they were immediately removed to ensure the safety of the enumerators.

Interviews with active ISIS foreign members were conducted in Syria and Turkey in person by my research assistant and in Mosul and Hawija by phone. The majority of interviews with former foreign fighters were conducted in Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, and Fergana Valley (Central Asia), where they were hiding or free after serving their sentence in prison. I met with them in places they considered safe, and those places varied widely. In one case, it was a comfortable café in a resort town, while in another, I was driven at night by one former foreign fighter to a forest that bordered another country to meet with another former foreign fighter. Sometimes after an interview at night, my subject would call to check if I had safely reached home; in another case, someone tried to kidnap me from the apartment where I was staying one night.

Sometimes main danger of conducting such interviews was coming from the side of ISIS, for example when for several hours I was interrogated by a member of ISIS Internal Security (Amni) because they found my knowledge suspiciously detailed, other times it was coming from official government entities in form of surveillance, denied visas and permits, intimidation and open threats because they did not want to be seen as not being able to control ISIS on their territory or wanted me to share information with them.

Due to the snowball methodology, foreign fighters from the former Soviet Union are overrepresented in the sample. On one side, it limits the generalizability of findings (although they were one of the biggest groups of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq), but on the other side, it allows for a case study from different angles; my Russian background and age afforded me a similar cultural background and allowed for more open discussion with these fighters.

My subjects agreed to meet with me for different reasons. Some were asked to do so by their friends and family who already trusted me, others were curious and bored. One ex-foreign fighter, after spending several days with me, even called a person who introduced us and thanked her because “for 4 years he did not have anyone to openly talk about what happened in Syria and now, after talking to me, he feels much better.”

For the information on group human resource policies, focus groups and snowballing methodologies were used. First, based on ethnographic information, a list of groups was constructed. Then, through a trusted network of people in Syria (particularly former fighters), contacts were made with people from those groups. The majority of interviews with a group's leaders and officer-level fighters were conducted in hospitals and refugee

camps in Turkey. Although I did not cover the entire country and two areas (Deir Ezzor and Aleppo) are overrepresented in the sample, this did not have a major impact on researching the labor market because fighters are more likely to move between groups that are in the same geographic area. Therefore, comparing different groups in one town serves the purpose of this study better than comparing groups in different remote parts of the country.

I also rely heavily on ethnographic research. I gained firsthand experience from being embedded with the Kurdish army (Peshmerga) operating around Jalawla (in 2015), Kirkuk (in 2015), and around Mosul (in 2016). I was also embedded with Iraqi Special Operations Forces in the Battle for Mosul, from the first day of the operation in October 2016 until the day Mosul was declared liberated in July 2017. After the operation was over, I also stayed with the Tribal Mobilization Force, which played the role of local police. In this capacity, I was able to participate in operations to catch hiding ISIS militants. That experience also allowed me to better understand how fighters lived on the frontline and how their day-to-day life was organized—what they ate, how they escaped the hot Iraqi sun, what they did for entertainment, and so on.

I was also able to collect data from the groups' internal documentation such as notes from what appears to be officer candidacy school lectures and drone pilots documents in addition to private notebooks containing religious writings, and even personal diaries militants often left behind.

To better understand refugees and their decision making, I spent several months in the Syrian refugee camp, volunteered in the detention center on the outskirts of Mosul,³⁶ participated in rescuing civilians across the frontline, and took part in the refugees' journey from Turkey to Germany.³⁷

I also traveled as far as Tunisia, Central Asia, and Bangladesh to understand where foreign fighters came from. There I visited and interviewed families of foreign fighters who were killed and those whose family members are currently in prison in Syria and Iraq.

³⁶ Visiting ISIS detention centers almost every day, I had countless opportunities to interview captured enemy combatants, but I did not. Not only for ethical reasons, but also because I did not believe that, while imprisoned, they would say anything other than what they thought an interviewer wanted to hear.

³⁷ Although I had all the required documents, I intentionally avoided encounters with law enforcement, much as refugees did. I did not take the boat from Turkey to Greece, but walked and went by train with refugees onward to Germany and Sweden.

In Osh (Fergana Valley), from where many Uzbeks left to Syria, one of ex ISIS foreign fighters gave me a tour of the towns most ISIS important places—neighborhoods and mosques; and in Duisi, a small village in Georgia, I stayed in the childhood house of Umar Shishani, ISIS military leader, on invitation of his father who told me about childhood of his son, the person who later became one of the most feared people in the world.

Finally, to look at rebel armed groups from the other side—the side of people fighting against them—I conducted interviews with U.S. military members participating in the U.S.-led coalition offensive, Shia militia units, and the Tribal Mobilization Force. In 2017, I also went to Lebanon to meet with Hezbollah political representatives to learn their opinion on my topic of research.

Book Plan

Following the introduction, in Chapter 1, I proceed with the general theory about how some groups increase their relative power inside the rebel bloc through the lens of labor market theory. I intend to show an individual group member's decision process, step by step, and shed light on how armed groups approached human resources challenges as they arose.

Then I turn to the case of the Syrian civil war, where I analyze on two levels: on an individual fighter's level, based on surveys and interviews with low-level ground troops; and on an organizational level, relying on the dataset of group policies, which is based on interviews with group leaders and officers.

In the first part of the project, I explore my topic through the local fighters' eyes. In Chapter 2, I look at the pool of potential local low-level members armed groups compete for. Specifically, I show why some people leave the war zone as refugees while others choose to stay despite the dangers. Among those who stay, why do some take up weapons and become fighters while others remain civilians? Finally, why do some local fighters eventually stop participating and demobilize?

In Chapter 3, I look at how armed groups match with their members. On one side, I show how local fighters chose a particular group to join and whether they switch groups and why. On the other side, I discuss the personnel management policies of the different groups ranging from moderate to radical—groups' recruitment strategies, salary policies, nonmonetary

benefits, and retention difficulties—in order to understand how they compete for fighters. To have a better understanding of how the labor market works, I look at how groups start and attract prospective fighters (recruitment), their personnel management policies (retention), and when fighters leave and groups disband (turnover). In particular, I show why, with time in conflict, FSA moderate groups were not successful in attracting and retaining members while radical groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, adopted more successful human resource policies and, as a result, became popular among prospective fighters.

In Chapter 4, I look at why the most popular armed groups had to employ strict radical ideology to control their ranks and ensure that only the most dedicated to the nonmaterial goal of the armed conflict are inside their ranks. In particular, I show how Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra tried to overcome the negative externalities that stem from their popularity with the help of Islamist ideology.

After a discussion of local fighters, I turn to their foreign brothers-in-arms. First, I look at the supply of foreign fighters. I try to understand what motivates some foreigners to support a war from the safety of their home countries while others join conflict abroad. This is followed by discussions on how foreign fighters chose a particular group to fight with and motivation of those who quit and left Syria (Chapter 5). Then I look at the armed groups' attitude toward those fighters; what benefits those fighters bring to the group, and how negative externalities from their membership could be mitigated (Chapter 6). In a comparison of Jabhat al-Nusra's (and affiliates) and ISIS's human resource policies, this chapter delves into how al-Nusra managed to get the most benefit from having foreign fighters while ISIS had many problems with managing its foreign members.

Next, I study the side effects of adopting strict ideology to control the labor force. Ideology is a strong weapon, but it could work against the group itself. Adopting strict rules grounded in ideology could help ensure the absence of people with low dedication levels in a group. What it could not do, though, is control the upper bar of dedication. Therefore, a group that portrays itself as ideological could be attractive to recruits more interested in the ideology than in the actual goal of the group. In particular, by comparing ISIS and al-Nusra, I show why one allowed ideology to affect its military and political strategy and endanger that group's existence (Chapter 7) while another was more successful in mitigating the negative side effects of its ideology (Chapter 8).

To even begin building a successful human resource strategy, groups have to make sure they have enough money to do so—they need to develop a sustainable financial model—so I next discuss group financial planning, budgeting, and other economic policies that are closely related to their success in the human resource domain (Chapter 9).

Groups are not blessed with good or bad policies; instead, it is their leadership that makes conscious decisions about their ideological orientations, financial planning, and human resource policies. And the quality of those decisions, among other things, depends on the qualification and experience of the group's leadership. Consequently, in Chapter 10, I look at the leadership labor market. Here I show why leaders make the strategic policy decisions they do, how leadership is chosen in different groups, and what long-term consequences leadership has on group success.

I conclude with policy implications not only for the current conflict in Syria but also for other ongoing conflicts in urgent need of resolution.

Scope of the Book

With this book, I contribute to the academic literature on political violence by shedding light on the internal organization of armed rebel groups and, in particular, the organization of their human resources. The main goal of this project is to analyze what makes particular armed groups powerful inside the rebel bloc, how they are able to attract and retain the most qualified members, and how they make their fighters the most effective in combat. I also try to shed light on armed groups' extreme ideology from a less conventional point of view—by looking at how armed groups operationalize it in order to screen and control their members.

Although this book is theoretical in nature (intended for an academic audience) and focuses on a relatively narrow subject within the civil war field, I hope it will help practitioners develop better policies addressing ongoing and future armed conflicts by exploring the internal mechanisms of rebel group operations. For example, by knowing who the fighters are and how non-state armed groups are organized, military leaders can be better equipped to develop tactics and strategies to combat such groups on the battlefield, politicians will be better informed when deciding which groups to support inside the rebel camp, policy experts will be better able to draft negotiation settlement proposals that could be acceptable to all sides, and

humanitarian workers will be more apt to design demobilization programs that are appealing to combatants. Understanding the internal operational use of ideology could also help improve anti-violent extremism policies not only by reducing the mystery that often surrounds this topic, but also by helping calibrate more precise and targeted interventions.

The book will also be interesting to a broader audience of people who want to better understand the complicated conflict in Syria and its implications for the security of other countries. I hope that by learning about fighters' individual decision making in civil wars, the reader will gradually come to see that many fighters participating in the Syrian civil war, even foreign members of Islamist groups, are not crazy, irrational, or fanatical as they are often portrayed, but instead are making rational decisions based on their goals, priorities, and personal circumstances.

1

Armed Groups Human Resource Manual

Although in my armed group there were only twenty people, managing it was one of the hardest things I had ever done. I was jealous of my fighters who could spend their time dreaming about virgins in heaven while I had to think about basically everything else. I could not even afford getting killed and going to heaven because I had to take care of all those people under my command. And I had no idea how to do so because I had no previous experience with armed groups. Back home I had been studying to be a dentist.

From an interview with an Uzbek former foreign fighter

For the rebel movement to become less fragmented, the number of groups involved in the war on any one side must decrease. Every armed group in a fractionalized rebellion desires this outcome and strives to become the only, or at least a leading, group in the rebel bloc. How can groups achieve this? There are several ways available to them.

First, one group could attempt to physically attack other rebel groups, one by one, in order to destroy them.¹ However, even if this strategy is successful (and defeated groups cease to exist), it could be a very costly move for the attackers. Not only would it consume limited ammunition, they risk sustaining casualties of their own, reducing their own size and capacity and even their overall extent and effectiveness. Such an onslaught would also result in civilian casualties, which would affect the attacking group's reputation among the local population and potential supporters. Most importantly, it would draw resources and attention away from fighting the enemy, who could use that potential window of opportunity to defeat the whole rebellion and win the war. Consequently, the attackers would be in an even

¹ Kristin M. Bakke, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, and Lee J. M. Seymour, "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion, and Infighting in Civil Wars," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (2012): 265–283.

more perilous position: being the forefront group fighting against the government is dangerous (particularly for the group's leadership) when the rebellion is crushed. In fact, in this circumstance, it is much safer to be just one of many rebel groups without any significant power.

A more covert strategy might also be employed. A group aspiring to lead the rebel camp could employ market economic insights and increase its standing at the expense of other groups by taking their main resource—manpower. Since different factions fighting on the same side are usually fighting for the same goal, groups all draw their members from the same pool of individuals, those interested in fighting for that particular goal. And because manpower is a finite resource, groups compete for the greatest number of the most qualified members. Moreover, as time goes on and inevitable casualties shrink the pool of people interested in fighting, the competition becomes even more acute. The number of potential fighters becomes less while the need for fighters remains stable, sometimes even increasing as new fronts open.² Therefore, a group would win this market competition by making itself the most appealing to potential new adherents and those who would switch from other rebel groups. This would both increase the one group's resources and decrease that of competitors in this zero-sum game.

This second, nonviolent approach is a more preferable option to most rebel leaders. This strategy does not endanger its own members; it does not waste time and resources fighting anyone other than the actual enemy; it does not give the enemy a window of opportunity, and it does not alienate the local population. It does, however, increase the group's value and reputation. It also starves other groups of new members, downgrading them, all the while significantly increasing the overall power of the group.

In low-technology civil wars, where all groups only have access to older weapons, power is a function of human resources, and the group that wins the internal competition for manpower will have a significant advantage. Moreover, competition in and of itself will force the group to optimize its internal processes and become stronger overall. Consequently, this nonviolent strategy is a preferable scenario in a fractionalized conflict for the group that aspires to be a dominant force and eventually establish a monopoly on the rebellion or even win the war.

² In many cases, the most dedicated fighters volunteered for the most dangerous missions and, as a result, were killed at disproportionately higher rates. This results in even more intense competition between armed groups for the quality of their recruits.

Throughout, I will use a labor market framework to analyze why some groups involved in the Syrian civil war became strong and increased in power while others disbanded. Attracting such talent happens on two levels: the ground level, with the fighters; and the top level, with group leadership. Both are equally important, highly interconnected, and inseparable.

In this chapter, I will lay out major human resource challenges that armed groups face in civil conflicts. First, I will look at the fighter labor market to understand how groups increased their ranks. Then I will look at how armed groups controlled their group members. And, finally, I will look at the leadership job market, which had its own rules for evaluating and attracting talent. And in the following chapters, I will look at how those challenges manifested themselves in the Syrian civil war and how armed group approached them.

Where Do Fighters Come From?

To understand how groups attract prospective fighters, it is first important to know what the labor pool of prospective members looks like, and how individuals self-select into the pool in the first place. Without knowing the decision-making process of individual fighters, groups would not be able to develop the most effective and least-costly policies to entice them.

When violence breaks out in an area, and the local people must decide what they are going to do, they have two main options: either they will seek refuge outside of the war zone, or they will stay on the frontlines despite the dangers involved. As grievances accumulate, their emotional desire to act upon them affects their decision to stay or to flee.

As shown by previous research, individuals who leave are making a rational choice by applying a cost-benefit analysis. They rationally assume that, in the event of war, there is less danger and more opportunities outside of the area. In contrast, if they stay, there are few rewards and they are at greater risk of being killed, especially at the beginning of the war. Social networks also play a key role in making this decision. People with friends and family members outside of a war zone are more likely to leave because of social pressure, and will more easily adapt to life in a new environment.³

³ Prakash Adhikari, "Conflict-Induced Displacement, Understanding the Causes of Flight," *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 1 (2013): 82–89; Christina Davenport, Will Moore, and Steven Poe, "Sometimes You Just Have to Leave: Domestic Threats and Forced Migration, 1964–1989,"

Thus, those who leave the conflict zone are not part of the pool of potential fighters rebel groups will compete for, at least not at the beginning of the war. There is little rebel groups could offer that would persuade those people to stay, at least in the beginning of the conflict. On the other side, it does not mean that these people who leave are not interested in the nonmaterial goal of the war. Some still want to help, but from the safety of abroad.

Those people who prefer to stay do not perform a cost-benefit calculation in quite the same way. Although they understand the risks involved, some do not leave only because they want to protect their family and property. Others are interested in the goals of the rebellion and want to support it. Consequently, those who stay to support the goal of the war enter the pool of potential members rebel groups are competing for.

Of those who stay, not all actually take up a weapon. Some are not ready to cross the line and take the risky step of active fighting. They reason their inexperience in combat would cost them their life and add little to the war effort. Although these people remain civilians, armed groups still compete for their loyalty because they also serve a purpose. Compared to official armies, rebel armed groups do not have combat support units that take on non-fighting-related roles such as cooking and cleaning, so they increasingly rely on civilians willing to contribute to the war efforts.⁴

Yet these goal-oriented civilians are not a vital resource that significantly increases the power of a rebel group; those who are willing to fight are. Emotions drive individuals who choose to ignore the risk associated with fighting and decide to act on their grievance on a frontline. Those people take up weapons, looking for revenge and to inflict maximum damage on the enemy. They eventually become fighters. They are also the main resource that groups compete for, and that competition continues until those individuals either get wounded or killed or lose hope.

International Interactions 29, no. 1 (2003): 27–55; Erik Melander and Magnus Öberg, “Time to Go? Duration Dependence in Forced Migration,” *International Interactions* 32, no. 2 (2006): 129–152; Erik Melander and Magnus Öberg, “The Threat of Violence and Forced Migration: Geographical Scope Trumps Intensity of Fighting,” *Civil Wars* 9, no. 2 (2007): 156–173; Will H. Moore and Stephen M. Shellman, “Fear of Persecution: Forced Migration, 1952–1995,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 5 (2004): 723–745; Will H. Moore and Stephen M. Shellman, “Refugee or Internally Displaced Person? To Where Should One Flee?” *Comparative Political Studies* 39, no. 5 (2006): 599–622; Will H. Moore and Stephen M. Shellman, “Whither Will They Go? A Global Study of Refugees’ Destinations, 1965–1995,” *International Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2007): 811–834.

⁴ Sarah Elizabeth Parkinson, “Organizing Rebellion: Rethinking High-Risk Mobilization and Social Networks in War,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 03 (2013): 418–432.

Some fighters eventually decide to voluntarily demobilize and return to civilian life. They become disappointed in the war and its goals, losing hope either in victory or in the belief that their own participation makes any difference. As a result, those individuals leave the pool of potential group members.⁵

Choosing a Group

Why prospective fighters choose to join a particular group is of interest to every rebel group trying to increase its relative power in the rebel bloc. While the decision to take up arms is based on a person's individual grievances, the decision to join a particular group is made rationally by comparing the organizational qualities of different groups fighting for the same goal. Although individual will in a fighter is crucial, it alone is not enough to carry out his goal. He must have facilitation. He is looking for a group that will allow him to inflict the most damage on the enemy, make him as comfortable as possible, and make him the most effective in the fight. Each individual fighter also needs funding and a team of people with similar goals he can rely on. This is something an institution (and, in this case, an armed group) helps him with, so fighters evaluate armed groups as a tool that enables them to better act on their grievance (be more successful in combat).

When making the decision to become part of the group, fighters particularly look at which group chooses the most important battles (and inflicts the most damage on the enemy) and provides the best fighting conditions. Once a fighter finds himself in a group whose internal policies do not satisfy him, he will try to switch to another, better-organized group fighting for the same goal. A fighter no longer interested in the overall goal of the conflict would voluntarily quit and demobilize. In this context, the civil war labor market has similarities to that of the civilian industry, where there is a matchup between employees and organizations.

In traditional business, the market is represented by companies with specific purposes and missions, and they hire employees in order to achieve those goals. To be the most competitive and successful in its industry, that

⁵ If there are not enough fighters interested in the goal of the war, but an armed group has monetary resources, it could try to recruit fighters interested in a salary. Those fighters are still not considered desirable by armed groups, so they are outside of the main pool of fighters groups are looking for.

company has to have the best people in the right places at the right time. It continually works hard to attract the best possible employees in a very competitive job market; to make those employees the most useful and highly skilled; and to prevent them from leaving to work for direct competitors.

The individuals—potential employees—first self-select into a particular industry and later choose a specific company among many. They decide whom to work for, evaluating offers based on which company will help them reach their goals and provide a better working environment (competitive salary and benefits such as health insurance, a good team, effective leadership, etc.). A multifaction civil war labor market follows the same principles.

Multiple groups in recent civil wars differ from the single rebel group of previous generations because they had a monopoly on the rebellion. For them, it was enough to further provoke the local population so they would join the rebel group (since they lacked other options to redress their grievance). But this is no longer the case. Groups now have to convince individuals not only to mobilize, but also to join *their* particular group. To do so, a group needs to possess the best organizational qualities among the other groups; otherwise, merely increasing the local population's grievances could in fact decrease a group's power by providing human resources for other groups. Groups must also have material resources and utilize them to ensure all fighters are trained and empowered to do their jobs. This requires organized combat logistics, weapons and ammunition supply, qualified leadership, a good working environment, and policies that take care of a fighter's individual needs.

Individual benefits for fighters are divided into immediate benefits and insurance. Although such things as salary and aid-in-kind are important, there also are long-term problems a fighter relies on a group to solve. Such problems include medical care for the wounded, postmortem arrangements for deceased fighters, and support for families. Since there are no official insurance guarantees (and little power to enforce any in a war-torn country even if there were), fighters must largely rely on a group's reputation in this matter.

Recent evidence from economics literature shows that a strong employer brand positively affects the applicant pool quantity and quality,⁶ the pride

⁶ C. J. Collins and J. Han, "Exploring Applicant Pool Quantity and Quality: The Effects of Early Recruitment Practices, Corporate Advertising, and Firm Reputation," *Personnel Psychology* 57 (2004): 685–717.

that individuals expect from organizational membership,⁷ and firm performance advantages over the broader market.⁸ Winning such a competition requires much more than propaganda and marketing. Of course, fighters must first perceive the group as a more worthy one to join, but it is also in the group's interest to actually *be* a better organization instead of just trying to create such an impression. Several reasons explain this. First, reputation matters in the super-competitive civil war industry. Second, fighters can switch to other groups if their expectations are not met.⁹ And finally, for a group to be successful, it must also use its members in the most effective way, by giving them the greatest added value. These fighters are better trained and able to focus on their goal without having to worry about providing enough food for their families; are healthier and have more energy because they eat more nutritious food; and are more willing to take risks in combat because they know they will be taken care of if wounded, and that their families will be taken care of in the event of their death. These conditions also make the group itself much stronger in the rebel bloc, and even help combat the enemy.

As we have seen, the group that is able to become a successful organization wins the competition for prospective fighters and makes the recruited fighters more effective. This means the group has more potential recruits than the leaders are willing to take on (that is, the supply exceeds the demand). But quantity does not mean quality, so having a lot of potential recruits alone does not guarantee the best possible recruits.

Choosing Fighters

As mentioned, jockeying to become the most popular group is a double-edged sword for a group's human resource wing. On one hand, the winner could swell its ranks and have first choice of the best local fighters among an increasing number of applicants. But on the other hand, the leading group also has to ensure the influx does not decrease the overall quality of its labor

⁷ D. M. Cable and D. B. Turban, "The Value of Organizational Reputation in the Recruitment Context: A Brand-Equity Perspective," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 33 (2003): 2244–2266.

⁸ I. S. Fulmer, B. Gerhart, and K. S. Scott, "Are the 100 Best Better? An Empirical Investigation of the Relationship Between Being a 'Great Place to Work' and Firm Performance," *Personnel Psychology* 56 (2003): 965–993.

⁹ In Chapter 3, I go into more detail about why that is the case.

force. This is because a good organization with good benefits often attracts more than just dedicated fighters—especially as civil war progresses. People become disillusioned with the war's goals, civilian income dries up, and a steadily increasing contingent of people become interested more in the material rewards and benefits the group offers its fighters than in fighting for a nonmaterial goal.¹⁰

As a result, a group also needs a way to filter out those people and prevent them from joining. Individuals motivated by something other than the group's goals would hesitate to take maximum risks in combat, and so will be less effective. Such members could also be more expensive for a group to maintain by demanding more benefits and also requiring more supervision, further upping costs. They would also be the most likely to change groups, leave the war zone altogether, or even switch sides if the enemy offered more money or if risks increased. In short, accepting such recruits into the group would mean wasting resources on people who do not generate the best return on investment.

These people could also destroy group cohesion, defined by the U.S. military as “the bonding together of soldiers in such a way as to sustain their will and commitment to each other, the unit, and mission accomplishment, despite combat or mission stress.”¹¹ This is key for a group's success on the battlefield since the primary group is a crucial factor in explaining combat behavior,¹² and soldiers advance and fight well only when organized as cohesive units. In particular, military studies on the performance of group units in combat and in training show that cohesive units fight better,¹³ suffer fewer battle casualties,¹⁴ suffer fewer non-battle casualties,¹⁵ train to higher

¹⁰ On the other hand, while some fighters indeed initially join for the immediate material benefit, through membership and being in combat, they could begin accumulating grievances and sharing the goals of the fight.

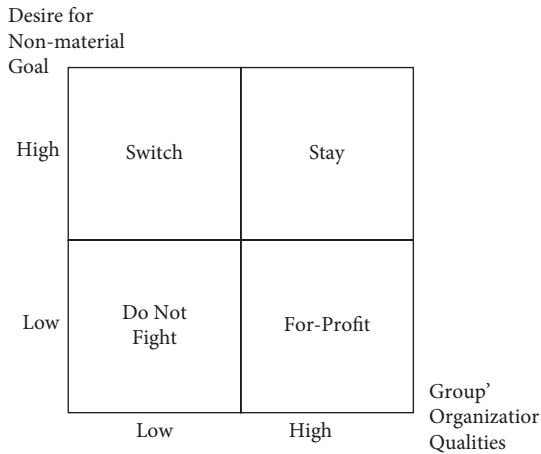
¹¹ Geoff Van Epps, *Relooking Unit Cohesion: A Sensemaking Approach* (BiblioGov, 2013).

¹² William D. Henderson, *Cohesion, The Human Element in Combat: Leadership and Societal Influence in the Armies of the Soviet Union, the United States, North Vietnam, and Israel* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1985).

¹³ Nora Kinzer Stewart, *Mates & Muchachos: Unit Cohesion in the Falklands/Malvinas War* (Washington, DC: Brassey's U.S., 1991); Laurel W. Oliver, *The Relationship of Group Cohesion to Group Performance: A Research Integration Attempt* (Alexandria, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 1988).

¹⁴ Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

¹⁵ Nora Kinzer Stewart, *South Atlantic Conflict of 1982: A Case Study in Military Cohesion* (Alexandria, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 1988).



Graph 1.1. Individual armed groups selection in a multifactional civil war.

standards,¹⁶ disintegrate less under stress,¹⁷ require less administrative support,¹⁸ and provide a higher quality of life.¹⁹

Overall, such material-oriented members are the least preferable to groups. Having those less dedicated members decreases the overall combat readiness of an armed group. Also, because it is one of the things other prospective fighters evaluate before joining or switching, it will ultimately harm recruitment and retention (Graph 1.1).

How could a successful armed group use financial resources wisely to solve this problem and screen such people out? First, they could rely on recommendations during the admission process. These could be garnered from people who know the applicant well and who are trusted by the group. When seeking recommendations, groups are interested in learning about a prospective fighter's behavior at the outset of the conflict or even before violence started. It is telling if a person was active in the civil war before any material resources became available, and when it was particularly

¹⁶ Steven Canby, Bruce Gudmundsson, and Jonathan Shay, *Commandant, United States Marine Corps Trust Study: Final Report* (Dumfries, VA: ACS Defense, Inc., 2000).

¹⁷ Frederick G. Wong, *A Formula for Building Cohesion* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1985).

¹⁸ Stewart, *South Atlantic Conflict of 1982*.

¹⁹ Canby, Gudmundsson, and Shay, *Commandant, United States Marine Corps Trust Study*.

dangerous to participate in the rebellion. Another way armed groups can see if a fighter is devoted to the goal is to send him, from time to time, to the most active frontline to fight. Here the group can monitor his behavior.

Although an entrance exam is a good way to understand an individual's history, it only predicts future behavior to a small degree. Likewise, the willingness-to-fight test has several major problems. There could be no enemy activity the day a fighter is sent to the frontline to be monitored. Even if active combat is occurring, someone has to take less risky combat support roles, so he will have less chance to prove how willing he is to risk his life for the group without acting recklessly. In addition, even if all prospective candidates are fighting, it is hard for a leader to constantly monitor everyone's behavior. Therefore, when the latter test is performed, one could perform well but could free-ride the rest of the time. Finally, there is no universally defined standard for what constitutes an acceptable willingness to risk one's life.

Armed groups that want to have only the most dedicated fighters must have other, more reliable ways to filter applicants, ways that would allow for constant and uninterrupted control of members. For this, armed groups rely on additional unproductive costs they impose on fighters for membership in the group—a code of conduct—similar to the economic club model theory of religious groups and sects developed by Iannaccone (1994), and later applied by Berman (2009) to religious sects and terrorist groups. To ensure they get only the most trustworthy and loyal prospective fighters, the most organized, successful, and well-funded groups not only screen prospective fighters, but also add a cost to membership. They do so by presenting prospective fighters with a condition: adherence to a strict set of requirements that have no direct relevance to their fighting ability. With such a cost in place, only the most dedicated fighters will agree, while those who had other priorities would be further discouraged. There are several criteria these requirements should satisfy to make them effective.

First, they should be costly for the individual, which means he must make significant effort to follow them. If those costs are not high enough, they are not a good screening mechanism because they would be too easy for someone to fake. Also, the requirements should not be enjoyable. People who enjoy the requirements cannot be separated from fighters who behave strategically, and as a result, the group's ability to screen decreases.

Although the requirements should be costly, following them should not take much time or energy because they are unproductive exercises—that is, they are not relevant to the fighting, and should not take time away from a

fighter's main activity: fighting. Otherwise, such requirements would be a liability for the group more than for its members.

In addition, such costs should also be very visible because their main purpose is to indicate when someone is slacking. The more visible those signals are, the more noticeable their absence is.

In the civilian world, a much milder version of this mechanism is called corporate or organizational culture. Organizational culture is made up of values, attitudes, norms, myths, and practices to ensure that organizational systems, processes, and activities are integrated and synergized. In addition, organizational symbols, songs, artifacts, and so forth are used to foster a culture of uniqueness, which makes employees feel proud of their jobs and the organization.

While organizational culture in the civilian world might sometimes seem a little strange, the unproductive costs and strict requirements employed by armed groups look irrational and bizarre at best. Consequently, groups need to at least try to explain the rationale behind them to their members. Ideology—which by definition is a group-specified set of ideals, principles, beliefs, doctrines, myths, or symbols of a social movement, institution, class, or large group that explains how society should work—often comes in handy for that purpose. To be able to serve as a rationale for assuming unproductive costs of membership in a group, an ideology should satisfy several conditions.

First, it should be related to a known philosophy so it is considered credible. That allows the ideology to be more acceptable by society, so it does not look absolutely alien. At the same time, it should be a relatively new or at least unpopular deviation from a known philosophy so there are not many people who enjoy (or are at least used to) the restrictions based on this ideology. Motivation of those people to join could be the restrictions themselves, and groups would not be able to distinguish those people from fighters who strategically comply with them.

The ideology should also be vague enough that varying interpretations could potentially provide divergent rulings on several issues, and as a result allow almost anything to be explained and rationalized with the help of the right experts. In addition, it also benefits the group if this ideology extends an individual's time horizon to further encourage him to take risks in combat.²⁰ This could be done either directly through offering afterlife,

²⁰ This is a particularly significant benefit if a group is fighting against a very effective military force and as a result is expecting to bear significant casualties.

or indirectly through his children (i.e., “You are building a successful future for your children”). As a result, any radical deviation of mainstream religions (Islam, Catholicism, or Orthodox Christianity) or state ideologies (communism, democracy, or monarchy) could be successfully employed for that purpose. For armed groups, any ideology is used as an instrument of internal control to increase its share of power. The ideology is very only mildly, if at all, correlated with the goal of the group.

Ideology as a screening mechanism has proven to be reliable, but it is not without problems, some of which are quite unexpected. When a group becomes popular, everyone (including civilians and their children) wants to visibly emulate its members. The best way to do so is to adopt the same set of visible signals that are mandatory for members of the group. Consequently, such internal restrictions and signals become popular and enter the mass culture, and as a result, those restrictions become less costly for group members to obey.²¹ If many people are doing something, it is less costly for others to emulate them compared to when one person is the only one doing it. To remedy this problem, groups have to either find a signal (restriction) that is costly for an individual independently from how others behave, or constantly invent new costly signals vaguely related to the group’s proposed ideology.

Foreign Fighters

To participate in the conflict, it is not mandatory to be local, so foreigners outside of the war zone face a similar combat participation dilemma. For those with an interest in civil war, their choice is not whether to leave or fight as it is with locals, but whether to go or not, and if they go (or send support from their own countries), what role they will play.

Like many local fighters, some foreigners are driven by the goals of the war and want to help. Others come for their own personal goals such as money, power, or religious call or simply to get fighting experience. While there are people who go with a positive perspective (going to something),

²¹ A similar situation happened with prison or gang tattoos in the United States. Tattoos started as a signal of belonging to a gang but consequentially became mainstream in U.S. culture. Because they became popular among non-gang members, they no longer served their original purpose for gangs.

many foreigners go with a negative perspective (getting away from something). They could be escaping prosecution in their home countries, be tired of discrimination at home, or have a grievance toward their own governments. Like local fighters, foreigners voluntarily quit and leave the battlefield when they no longer believe they can reach the goal they came for.

While some foreigners decide to take a risk and go to the frontline, others do not. Instead, like local members of the diaspora, they actively help armed groups (albeit from outside) with media outreach, collecting money, buying and sending equipment, and helping potential fighters move to the battlefield.

While in the conflict zone, similar to local fighters, foreigners need to choose a group to fight with. And the logic employed by foreign fighters in choosing a group is similar to that of local fighters. First, foreign fighters choose the goal they want to fight for, and then they choose among groups that fight for that goal. In particular, they look at which group will provide them and their families with safety, which will offer individual material benefits (and are fair in distributing them), which is better organized internally, and the group's relative prestige.

On the other side, compared to local fighters, foreigners experience more difficulties in the process of choosing and switching groups, and their path is less straightforward. Foreigners usually do not have many options of groups to fight with, and their movement between groups is also more restricted. Many foreign fighters are not familiar with the country and do not have a wide network of contacts; in many cases, they do not even speak the local language. That makes it particularly challenging for them to navigate the complicated map of available rebel groups.

Why would groups take foreign fighters? There are several major benefits only they can offer to a group. Often foreigners have knowledge and experience that local fighters do not, and some have necessary connections in the international war industry (for example, to buy weapons) that locals need time to develop. Usually they are more dedicated to their goals than their local counterparts because, even to get to the frontlines, they have to overcome many more obstacles. Foreigners are better in fundraising in their home communities and, as a result, provide armed groups with additional source of income. Finally, they can be a successful asset for propaganda purposes; having them can assure local fighters of the justness of their cause, while the enemy who understand their dedication.

On the other hand, it is much harder for an armed group to manage foreigners compared to local group members. First, foreign fighters often are not familiar with the local language or terrain. Second, they could cause problems with locals either unintentionally (due to the differences in culture) or intentionally (looking down on local fighters and civilians). Third, their presence in the group could decrease overall group cohesion. Because of the differences in language and culture and potential distrust of locals, foreigners tend to segregate inside the group. In extreme cases, leaders could even lose control of such segregated foreign subgroups, which could lead to insubordination and internal conflicts. Fourth, foreign fighters could more easily be recruited as spies by foreign intelligence agencies than their local comrades.

Foreign fighters are also harder for the group to screen. Although they have to be recommended like local fighters do, it is also harder to check those who vouched for them. And finally, because foreign fighters often join the conflict with different motives than those of local fighters, it could lead to differences in combat strategy and tactics that eventually slow down war efforts. Even if both foreign and local fighters had similar goals when they joined, the different circumstances of their combat participation may lead them to make different combat strategy decisions. For example, since it is harder for foreign fighters to hide, they would be more interested in controlling territory and conventional warfare while local fighters would be more likely to consider insurgency operations.

As a result, despite the benefits that foreign fighters offer to the local armed groups, managing them in order to get maximum benefit and reduce negative side effects is challenging for an armed group. To be successful, they need to evaluate their capacity to manage foreign fighters before accepting them.

Combating Extremism

Ideology is a strong weapon, but it could work against the group itself. Adopting strict rules grounded in ideology can screen out people with low dedication levels from a group, but it cannot control the upper bar of dedication. Therefore, a group that portrays itself as ideological may be attractive to recruits more interested in the ideology than in the actual goal of the group. In other words, these recruits may be more radical

than the group wants its fighters to be. Counterintuitively, this is a major vulnerability for a group that claims to be ideological. In fact, it is even more dangerous for the group than not controlling the lower bar and letting undedicated members in. If the group cannot screen out undedicated recruits, they would simply waste a group's resources (drawing a paycheck with no interest in fighting), but the presence of the overly devoted could lead to internal conflicts.

This problem is particularly acute for groups that choose to accept foreign fighters. Propaganda and an outside view of the war affect foreign fighters' biases, and they see the goals of the war differently than local fighters do. As a result, they are more likely to misinterpret an armed group's use of ideology to control its human resources as an ideological conflict. There are several problems associated with group ideology and foreign fighters:

1. Because those group members are more interested in the ideology than in the group's military and political objections, they put ideological objectives in front of military necessity and, as a result, make the group less effective on the battlefield and in the political arena.
2. Once in the group, they soon realize it was not what they expected and become disappointed. From there, it is only a matter of time until they act on that disappointment. They might stay in the group and sabotage it from the inside, or leave and harm its reputation from the outside.
3. More radical group members will not be satisfied with the average level of the group's ideology and will try to increase it to their desirable level, challenging the leadership. And because by definition they are extremely dedicated to their goal, little would stop them in pursuing those changes.

Even if a group is successful in mitigating a threat posed by those individuals, it would take significant time and resources away from the main group objective. As a result, well-organized groups in the rebel bloc need to find a delicate balance between using ideology as a screening mechanism and preventing it from becoming a fighter's top priority. To achieve that, armed groups need to be very clear about their true goals to avoid any misunderstanding among potential recruits. Also it is helpful to have a small but more radical non-independent armed group in the rebel bloc to attract, like a magnet, such fighters away from a main mother group. That

will allow the group to still use the highly dedicated foreign fighters for the war goals without them threatening the mother group and its leadership.

Leadership

As I have shown, a group's human resource policies are an important factor for success. They allow a group to win the competition for fighters and ensure effective selection criteria. As a result, these policies increase a group's relative power in the rebel bloc. This fact points to the other important factor in a group's success. Such policies are developed and implemented by a group's leadership, making leaders another crucial factor in a successful armed group.

As in any company, the quality of the internal policies of an organization depends on the quality and experience of its CEOs.²² Although the usual image of a CEO is someone in an expensive suit sitting in a luxurious office, his job is not that different from that of an officer in a military uniform working in a combat zone. Although he may look like a fighter, his main job is actually bureaucratic in nature—organizing the group's day-to-day activities, running its financial operations, keeping track of logistics, and developing public relations and human resource policies, among other things. The job rebel leaders are the most known for—overseeing military operations—is just one of their many responsibilities.

With qualified leaders, armed groups can monopolize the rebel movement or, at least, become a leading group in the rebel bloc. These are men who can develop effective internal policies so their armed group is attractive to prospective members. These leaders should also be in the position to fund those policies.

To be competitive, let alone win, in the rebel market, a group should have adequate material resources and be able to spend them wisely. Many group characteristics that are attractive to prospective members, such as salaries and medical care, are not only expensive but are also long-lasting in nature, requiring long-term investments. In effect, one of the main jobs of leaders is to balance the budget, maximize income, and optimize spending.

²² D. C. Hambrick and P. A. Mason, "Upper Echelons: The Organization as a Reflection of Its Top Managers," *Academy of Management Review* 9, no. 2 (1984): 193–206.

In contrast to regular state armies, rebel armed groups do not have a budget assigned to them every year. Instead, it is a leader's responsibility to find money for the group. Sources of funding are not endowments the groups are blessed with, nor are they even permanent. Thus, leaders must strategically choose and secure different funding sources at different periods of time.

There are different ways a group can obtain financial resources. As shown by previous research, revenue for armed groups can be obtained by securing financial support from diaspora groups,²³ building relationships with foreign patron states,²⁴ exploiting natural resource wealth,²⁵ or extracting rents from civilians (either voluntarily or forcibly). Each source differs in terms of the amount possible to obtain, the duration of funding, the time and effort required, and the ethics involved in the pursuit. So effective leadership should be able to not only acquire this funding, but construct a portfolio of funding sources that will be the most suitable to group goals. (A particular funding portfolio that would be the most effective in the short term could be the least appropriate in the long and protracted conflict.)

Some leaders develop a portfolio of funding with enough resources to not only run day-to-day operations, but also to fund long-term projects such as medical care and social security benefits for their fighters. Other leaders take their groups down completely different economic paths that could lead to a lack of financial resources and inevitable bankruptcy. The quality and experience of a group's leaders has a direct impact on its budget planning.

This shows that no organization can have a successful long-term strategy if it does not have leaders with the right qualifications to plan it; and no good plan will work if there is no one capable of executing it. This means that a successful group will aspire to have the most effective top-level and

²³ Paul Collier and Anke Hoefler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (2004): 563–595. James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 01 (2003): 75–90. Nicholas Sambanis, "What Is Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 6 (2004): 814–858.

²⁴ Daniel Bynman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, and David Brannan, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001).

²⁵ Michael Ross, "The Natural Resource Curse: How Wealth Can Make You Poor," in *Natural Resources and Violent Conflict: Options and Actions*, ed. Ian Bannon and Paul Collier (World Bank, 2003): 17–42; Michael L. Ross, "What Do We Know About Natural Resources and Civil War?" *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (2004): 337–356; Macartan Humphreys, "Natural Resources, Conflict, and Conflict Resolution: Uncovering the Mechanisms," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 4 (2005): 508–537.

midlevel leadership available. While an experienced and qualified leader could build a sustainable organization from scratch, an unqualified person could derail an already successfully functioning one.

Here emerges the gap between successful and unsuccessful groups. Successful groups are able to find or internally promote the most qualified people, learn from their own mistakes and the mistakes of others, and build a functioning organization, while unsuccessful ones fail to do so. Unsuccessful groups think meritocracy is not the most effective system for choosing leadership. Other unsuccessful groups, while realizing the importance of choosing the most qualified candidates, cannot always find or recognize people with the right qualifications.

Two main problems with leadership selection that any organization faces are even more challenging in civil war settings. The first one is choosing the best candidate from among as good a pool of candidates as possible (meaning there must be qualified people to choose from), and the second one is a fair, incorruptible hiring process that favors the best leadership candidates for the position. In a civil war setting, there are several problems related to both an adequate pool and process.

At the very beginning of a civil war, the main problem is the pool of potential leaders to choose from. This candidate pool, in general, is small and weak. Because there is no money or power involved, fighters who might have some leadership skills have no incentive to take on the extra responsibilities of leadership. Virtually everyone who joined at that point joined to fight, not perform managerial tasks, even if that is what they were doing during peacetime. Their main goal is to satisfy their grievance and desire for revenge, and so they prefer to take part directly by physically inflicting cost and damage on the enemy rather than indirectly, by operating in a managerial role.

Second, the initial pool of potential candidates is weak, at least for the majority of groups, because even if someone has leadership abilities, it is uncommon to find someone with experience actually running a rebel group. And even if they exist, they are likely to be already concentrated in one particular armed group, men who know each other and thus feel more comfortable working together.

In addition, it is hard for fighters to choose the right initial leader because they are also inexperienced. They do not have enough information about a candidate to evaluate him or enough experience to even know what qualities to look for. Because fighters do not have time to accumulate knowledge

about a potential leader's managerial and fighting skills, they have to rely on very noisy signals from a potential leader, such as his interpersonal relations or level of intelligence. Since almost no one has any previous war experience, fighters must assess his potential based on those signals. Often, in those circumstances, the selection process yields less than optimal results.

Later in the course of the war, the problem of a weak pool becomes less crucial as individuals gain experience in fighting and running an armed group. Then the second problem, choosing the best candidate, increases in importance. Since valuable resources are now employed, corruption and nepotism become common problems some groups are unable to solve. A growing number of people motivated by personal greed become interested in leadership positions, and in many cases, experience and knowledge are not used as the main criteria. As a result, the whole process could become increasingly corrupt and inefficient, again leading to poor outcomes for a group.

However, choosing top leadership is only part of the problem. Even the best policies from the top chain of command can be successfully executed only if those down the line are qualified to do so. Thus, it is also important to recruit people with the best knowledge and experience to occupy midlevel leadership positions. Midlevel leaders can come from inside the group or as the result of attracting talent from outside.

The main role of executive leadership is not just running an organization's day-to-day activities, but building a sustainable internal bureaucracy that will continue functioning even after the founding leaders are gone. And being able to build a sustainable institutional mechanism is even more important than simply having a good leader, especially in civil war settings. Without qualified midlevel leadership, even the best ideas from top leadership are wasted. In addition, midlevel leadership should be equipped to solve problems too minor to occupy top leadership. Clear structure is needed so an organization can grow without losing effectiveness. By definition, a successful group will grow in numbers, so being able to do so smoothly is essential for groups trying to increase their share of power. When a group grows, additional low-level leadership should be immediately implemented and allow for power decentralization.

An additional problem faced by rebel groups is the high likelihood of leaders—in top and middle levels—being killed in combat. In an ordinary organization, a director's tenure is already established, and even if he becomes sick or wants to retire, he will usually have time to choose and

train a successor. This is not the case in a combat zone. Here, a group leader could be killed in a matter of seconds without having chosen a substitute or passed on any knowledge. Even more devastating to a group is the death of several leaders at the same time.

As more midlevel leadership positions open up, more low-level fighters can be promoted. First, a fighter must qualify for the position he is planning to assume. Second, he should be dedicated. If a fighter is not fully dedicated to the goal, he will not work to the best of his abilities, and could even defect to the enemy. Because midlevel leaders have important access to information, defection could result in material damage to the group. To reduce the chances of this happening, fighters who have lost friends or family members in combat are given promotional priority. Leaders assume that the more grievance a fighter has, the more he will thirst for revenge, and as a consequence, the more dedicated he will be to the goal of the war. This means he will work harder to advance the group's goals and be less likely to defect.

Groups do not want their leaders to defect to the enemy, but they also do not want them changing groups within the rebel bloc. In the best-case scenario, a leader who switches to another group would be nothing more than a loss on investment. But in the worst case, such a move could cost a leader's initial group its competitive advantage. If he is a popular leader, for example, low-level fighters may follow him. In addition, because groups cannot enforce a nondisclosure agreement like companies working in developed countries can, they regard loyalty as a key element for promotion. Rebel groups do not have the luxury of having enforceable job contracts; thus loyalty becomes their only recourse against defection.

To ensure that leaders are dedicated, groups employ the principle of restriction and costly ideology-based signaling of their loyalty. Similar to the required unproductive costs that a popular group employs for screening its members, fighters who aspire to be promoted to midlevel leadership positions could voluntarily send a signal, using the same ideological reasoning, by following an even stricter set of regulations. For example, if the internal rule in a civilian company is that everyone starts work at 8 a.m. each day, employees who aspire to be promoted will try to arrive earlier so their boss sees them when he arrives. The situation in armed groups is similar. A fighter who wants to get promoted will try to show his loyalty by exceeding minimal behavioral requirements imposed by the group's Islamist ideology.

As shown by organizational behavior research,²⁶ leadership crisis is the top issue a company needs to overcome during its development, followed by crises of autonomy, control, and red tape that could also destroy the organization. Previous research has documented that well-developed armed groups also struggle with control and red tape in their day-to-day operations,²⁷ but many more groups do not even overcome the very first organizational crisis—lack of effective leadership. They never select the most qualified and experienced leaders from an available pool of candidates, which results in losing fighters to more successful competing armed groups, which ultimately leads to group dissolution.

Conclusion

To become the leading, if not sole, group in the rebel bloc, a group should be able to marshal all possible financial and human resources available. Because rebel groups have no official budget, they have to compete among themselves for money. Obtaining it is also a function of human resources on both of those levels: ground troops and upper-level leaders. For example, a large group has a greater chance of winning control of a country's natural resources, and experienced leaders are more likely to develop relations with interested foreign actors for potential financial support.

Therefore, a group that aspires to dominate must be appealing to potential group members. Conversely, since someone who self-selects to be a fighter evaluates armed groups based on their ability to facilitate his fighting, he will look for the most organized, and thus effective, group that fights for the goal he is interested in. In particular, a fighter values a group's choice of military operations, combat competency in logistics, weapons and ammunition provision, and personal benefits that would allow him to concentrate on fighting and not think about other problems. As a consequence, groups with leaders able to develop and implement such human resource policies and secure resources to fund them become the most popular among fighters. But since quantity does not imply quality, an effective group

²⁶ Larry E. Greiner, "Evolution and Revolution as Organizations Grow," *Harvard Business Review* 54, no. 4 (July/August 1972): 37–46.

²⁷ Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

has to make membership costly by asking members to follow a set of rules rationalized by an ideology that ensures only the most dedicated fighters are accepted. At the same time, they should be clear about the group's true goal and not accept people more interested in the ideology itself.

To increase effectiveness even further, armed groups could choose to ask for help from qualified foreigners who, for example, have particular expertise in a field crucial for the group. In this case, before recruiting such an individual a group needs to make sure that there is no misunderstanding about the goals of the war and that the group is in the position to effectively manage such foreign labor force.

As a result, a group whose leaders follow these strategies has a bigger chance to win the competition within the rebel bloc. The group will become large, cohesive, and dedicated to the goal. It will also control substantial financial resources and will have effective internal policies and qualified leadership, which further increases its chances on the battlefield.

However, those leading groups will most likely portray themselves as ideological. And the longer the group spends in war, the more strict its internal restrictions become. This is to keep up with the constantly depreciating costs the group uses to signal loyalty, and the more restrictions used, the more radical the group will look from the outside. At the same time, such a visible increase in radicalization will have little correlation with a group's strategy and performance because successful armed groups will not allow ideology to affect their military and political strategy.

Although human resource policies related to ground troops are defined by the highest leadership level, the characteristics of leadership and ground troops are highly interdependent. Qualified potential leaders will likely not be interested in a group with less dedicated fighters and weak administration, and more dedicated fighters will be looking for groups with more qualified leadership and effective policies. As a result, there is a strong path dependency, and it makes it hard to disrupt the group development trajectory externally.

While in this chapter I laid out general major human resource challenges armed groups face in civil conflicts, in the next chapters I will look at the particular challenges armed groups in the Syrian civil war encountered and how they approached them.

2

Leaving, Staying, Fighting

The average scene on a street in Aleppo could be divided into two parts: before and after the revolution. Before, there was regular life—children playing different games after school, cars and bikes stacked in traffic, vendors in small shops selling fruits and vegetables to engineers, teachers, students, and government employees as they passed by—everyday people carrying on their everyday business.

When the revolution turned into a civil war, everything changed. There were no more playing children, open shops, or cars on the street. Instead, people with weapons (fighters) were sitting at checkpoints drinking tea brought to them by people without weapons (civilians), and watching others flee their homes (refugees). Overnight, the kaleidoscope of identities melded into three new ones—fighter, civilian, or refugee—and each local had to choose where he (or she) fit in. To understand how the labor market of rebel fighters works, it is important to start by studying the pool of potential fighters armed groups are competing for by first following, step by step, the decision-making process of individuals in the civil war.

In any civil war, the local population first separates into two groups: those who go (the refugees) and those who stay. Those who stay further split into those who take up arms (fighters) and those who do not (civilians). In this chapter, I will examine the motives and behaviors of these three factions as revealed through surveys and interviews conducted on Syria's frontlines and in a Turkish refugee camp. First, I will look at why some people chose to leave the conflict area and become refugees while others chose to stay despite the obvious risk. Then I will discuss why, among those who stayed, some chose to stay civilians while others preferred to take up weapons and become fighters. And finally, I will shed light on why some fighters chose to quit fighting and demobilize, becoming either civilians or refugees.

A sample of fighters and civilians was chosen from two areas: in and around Aleppo, Syria's second largest city and the place of the major battles at the time of research, and in and around the city of Idlib, which was also experiencing violence but generally was considered a safer area

for rebel forces and civilians. Because I am interested in difficult-to-reach subpopulations in dangerous environments with unknown population parameters, I use cluster-sampling methods.¹ Former fighters from the same regions were also surveyed both in Syria and in Turkey. Civilians were interviewed in areas of the city where they congregate, and members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Jabhat al-Nusra, and Ahrar al-Sham were surveyed in and around their bases and safe houses. Also, refugees were interviewed in a refugee camp run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Kilis (Turkey), which is just across the border from Syria and was a primary destination for refugees fleeing the Aleppo and Idlib regions.²

When the conflict began, some people left the conflict zone as refugees, and the majority of fighters were still under the FSA umbrella. As part of the broader “Voices of Syria” project (with Sam Whitt and Loubna Mrie) in 2013, approximately three hundred refugees, civilians, and fighters were surveyed on how they self-selected into those roles. And, in 2015, when fighters started quitting and leaving the conflict zone *en masse*, 150 former fighters were tracked and asked about their decision to leave and what their future plans were.

In an extensive thirty-page survey, the same core questions were used for all subgroups, with additional questions related to their self-selection into a particular role in the conflict that varied between groups. The survey generally took from forty-five minutes to an hour to complete. All interviews were conducted face to face in Arabic by my research assistant, with assurances of privacy and confidentiality in what both the subject and interviewer mutually agreed to be a safe location. Because the presence of a foreign female during the interview could have biased the answers, I was present during only some of the surveys in order to ensure the quality of data collection.

For interviews with rebel fighters, two predominant subgroups were surveyed: rebels fighting with the FSA and Islamist groups,³ and of those, mostly members of the Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra. At the time of my research, those groups were increasing in size and power the quickest. Former

¹ I acknowledge the limitations of the data. There is no way to estimate the true population and draw a random sample. The sample collected is nonrandom and the number of observations is limited, collected over an extended period of time.

² Inside the camp, the interviewer followed a random route, interviewing no more than one per household and no more than five subjects on a given street or pathway.

³ Groups were classified into “moderate” and “Islamist” categories based on the assessment of local civilians and in conjunction with official U.S. definitions, particularly the terrorist group list.

fighters were interviewed both in Syria and Turkey; they were selected by a snowball method.⁴ Interviewed active members of armed groups were asked to introduce the researcher to demobilized former members of their groups. This method allowed me to compare active and former members from the same groups.

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

In the spring of 2011, the Syrian conflict started with the first clashes between peaceful protesters and regime forces. Suddenly, local individuals were confronted with a dilemma. They had to choose whether to leave as refugees, stay as civilians, or to join the armed rebellion. Many people chose to leave.⁵ When refugees were asked why they left, their reasons were varied.

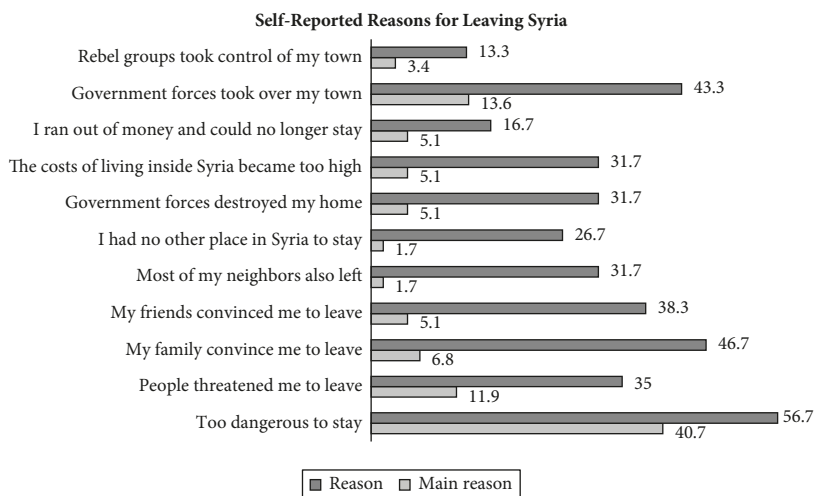
Similar to refugees observed in other conflicts,⁶ Syrian refugees applied a cost–benefit reasoning to the situation. According to the survey of refugees in Turkey of those who did not have a desire to fight (for any nonmaterial goal such as democracy), the benefits of leaving far outweighed the cost of doing so (Graph 2.1). Even if refugees did harbor some desire to stay and fight (more than 75 percent of refugees agreed with the goals of fighters), that desire was overshadowed by concerns for safety, family, and the possibility of employment elsewhere. Most surveyed refugees who left Syria for Turkey left either because it was too dangerous to stay (41 percent) or because their homes or towns had already fallen under enemy control (18 percent). People were concerned not only about direct violence (being shot and shelled) but also about being arbitrarily detained by the uncertainty of war, or being kidnapped because of their political views, activities, or family affiliations. Males (18 to 45 years old) whose areas were controlled by the regime were particularly afraid of being drafted into Assad’s army.

Another 11 percent cited economic hardship as their main reason for leaving. As one refugee explained:

⁴ Snowball sampling is a nonprobability (nonrandom) sampling method used when characteristics to be possessed by samples are rare and difficult to find. This sampling method involves primary data sources nominating other potential primary data sources to be used in the research.

⁵ In the first year of the war, as many as 200,000 Syrians left the country. From Mia Shanley, “Syrians Fleeing War Start to Trickle into Europe,” *Reuters* (Sept. 4, 2012).

⁶ Prakash Adhikari, “Conflict-Induced Displacement, Understanding the Causes of Flight,” *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 1 (2013): 82–89.



Graph 2.1. Refugee survey: self-reported reasons for leaving Syria.

Although my sons were fighting and I supported the goals of the revolution, I had to leave for the sake of my daughters. Schools were closed, but I did not want them to stop their education. Because I am a schoolteacher myself, very soon we also ran out of money. There was no option for a normal life inside of Syria anymore—staying on the regime’s side was dangerous because the government was questioning me about my sons, and moving to FSA territory was even more dangerous because of constant shelling by the regime.

Social pressure also appears to have played a role in their decisions. Some say they were threatened/warned by others to leave (12 percent of civilians) or that their friends and family pressured them to leave (12 percent of refugees). It was particularly the case in the mixed areas (Alivites and Sunnis) where, with time, even during still-peaceful protests, groups started segregating. One Alivite refugee remembered shopping in a supermarket owned by Sunnis because it had a good delivery system. But when protests started, their Alivite friends suggested they stop shopping there. When Sunni friends visited their family, people from the neighborhood followed them until they left the area. With time, these conditions worsened.

So despite the hardship of the journey and sadness, whole families left their homes, taking only what they could carry. Because they were on foot,

they left many items along the way because carrying them for a long time simply became too difficult. Often, by the end of their journey to neighboring countries, they were left with nothing more than essentials—some clothes, old photographs, documents, and in some cases pets (it was not strange to see someone carrying a cat or a cage with birds). According to these new refugees, whatever uncertainty waited for them in an unknown country was better than what they left behind in war-torn Syria.

On the other hand, some people who chose not to be in Syria during the war still supported its goals and continued to contribute to the war effort from the safety of a foreign country. For example, many refugees (and members of the diaspora who were already outside of Syria when the war started) contributed to the cause by raising funds for Syrian armed groups and civil organizations, while others increased awareness of events through social media or other avenues.

Although a great many Syrians opted for the safety of refugee status, many others did not. These were the individuals who chose instead to remain on the frontline. What informed their decision to expose not only themselves but their family and children to the risk of economic hardship, serious injury, and even death? To answer this question I relied on a survey of civilians interviewed in Aleppo and Idlib. In the survey (Table 2.1), many said they stayed to assist rebel forces in the fight (63 percent). However, the majority also claimed to have no other option but to stay (66 percent). Many people did not have family and friends elsewhere who would help (48 percent) or the money to travel to a safer location (42 percent).

Table 2.1 Civilian Survey: Reasons for Staying in Syria

<i>Do you agree with the following statements?</i>	Yes (%)	Number surveyed
I have no other option but to stay here.	66.3	80
I would go somewhere safer if I had family, friends to help me.	47.6	84
I would go somewhere safer if I had money to do so.	42.2	83
I would go somewhere safer if travel were less dangerous.	34.9	76
I am staying to protect my family.	51.3	80
I am staying to protect my home/property.	59.0	83
I am staying to fight.	56.5	85
I am staying to help those who are fighting.	62.4	85

For many, the cost concerns associated with leaving were a very real issue, especially if an individual had taken part in any antigovernment activity, including peaceful demonstrations. A person with no history of antigovernment activity would be allowed to pass through regime border checkpoints, but if an individual's name was on the regime's wanted list, there were only limited, and costly, options. One was relying on smugglers, who initially charged a \$25 fee per person for their services. Another option, bribing a regime army officer at a checkpoint, could cost up to \$3,000 per person. When rebels later took control of some of the checkpoints, it became easier for people to exit Syria. Yet the increase of refugees made it more difficult to enter Turkey, and so refugees still had to rely on smugglers, whose prices had risen with the demand from \$25 in 2011 to \$400 by 2014.

Being smuggled in also had its own set of concerns. It could be physically challenging, requiring long walks in the dead of night, and since it was illegal activity, the outcome was unpredictable. While some were lucky and could get through on the first try without incident, others risked being shot at by Turkish security. Still others were caught by Turkish security and deported back to Syria, where they would have to start all over again. This would mean paying another smuggler and trying to cross multiple times.

If the cost of crossing was expensive for certain individuals, the cost of housing in Turkey was prohibitive. Even before the war, housing was more expensive in Turkey than in Syria, and as the conflict escalated, so did real estate prices in Turkish border towns. Often, before crossing, individuals would check with friends or family in a particular Turkish town to see if they could stay with them, at least for the first several days. If not, their destination would be a refugee camp. And even though conditions in Turkish refugee camps were considered incomparably better than those in other countries bordering Syria, families would still have to live in one room of a container or tent.

Other factors also kept civilians from leaving. For some surveyed civilians who chose to stay in the conflict zone, traveling seemed more dangerous than staying in place (35 percent). More than half also claimed they were staying put to protect their homes (59 percent) or other family members (51 percent).

In addition to the hardships of leaving home, dedication to the rebellion also played an important role for the individuals who, despite deteriorating conditions and security, stayed put. By choosing to stay, these civilians

signaled some level of allegiance to the rebel cause, thus becoming the most natural initial labor pool for mobilization efforts.

The Start of a Civil War

In March 2012, in front of a relatively large group of fighters, a young commander with a Syrian revolutionary flag on his neck made a speech:⁷

In the name of Allah, most merciful and powerful of all: May Allah grant us victory and guide us. I'm Captain Mohammad Haj Hassan of the third unit, and I declare my defection of Al-Assad's criminal gangs with a group of officers, and the formation of Al-Tahreer ("Liberation") battalion in Idlib's suburbs, affiliated with the FSA. Our aim is to exterminate and eliminate Al-Assad criminal gangs, protect peaceful protesters, and achieve our revolution's objectives. Long live Syria, as free and strong and victory for the revolution!

As he continued, his troops repeated after him, "We swear by God Almighty / To protect our revolution / And our religion / And our dignity / And our country / And to continue our revolution / Until the last drop of our blood. And Allah is witness to what we're saying." These were people who were once ordinary civilians with ordinary lives. Why, all of a sudden, did they take up weapons?

Soon after Assad's army began targeting peaceful protesters, the first militarized units were born, thousands of them, mostly consisting of people who wanted to protect their neighborhoods and keep nonviolent protesters safe. In Deir Ezzor, one of the first groups was named "Mohamed" in the Al Jubely neighborhood, where all the protests were passing through. They were a tight-knit group of between five and fifteen men who had grown up together and had participated in the peaceful demonstrations together. When the regime army attacked protesters, these men armed themselves with light weapons, such as pistols. Soon other neighborhoods, especially those located on the route where protesters passed, started organizing

⁷ The official flag of a Syrian Arab Republic (Assad Government) is red, white, and black with two green stars in the middle. A flag that is considered revolutionary and was used in protests and by some (moderate) armed groups is green, white, and black with three red stars in the middle.

similar groups. They also set up checkpoints and would not allow the regime's military vehicles to enter the area.

A fighter from one of the first militias explains the process: "We were just ten to fourteen guys from one village, and from the beginning . . . when the regime opened fire on the protestors, we took up guns to protect them. After our village was liberated from the regime, we officially named ourselves Abu Ammarah. We understood each other very well and we shared the same vision for a country."

The last of the small armed groups finished mobilizing after the fighting had already started and the regime was committing large-scale crimes. Groups like Shohadaa Al-Jourah (Al-Jourah's Martyrs) were formed as a response to the massacre committed by the regime in the Al-Jourah neighborhood. At that point, local men decided there was no point in waiting anymore; they would have to organize themselves and at least try to prevent the regime from advancing.

After the Syrian regime's army was sent to Daraa province to quell ongoing protests, another militia began to emerge. Some of the regime's army units refused to take part in the crackdown on antigovernment protests. Instead of obeying commands to open fire on protesters, both rank-and-file soldiers and mid-ranking officers split from the army and defected to the side of the rebellion. In July 2011, these defectors joined local militias and formally announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Meanwhile, mobilization among civilians continued to increase. Battles began to break out, and the more the regime army violently suppressed the protests, the more peaceful demonstrators joined the armed fight. In neighborhoods controlled by the regime, activists posted flyers encouraging people to join the FSA with a phone number to call. From there, activities were coordinated online. In neighborhoods with no regime presence, activists shouted slogans from megaphones and mosques: "Come protect your city from the government because they will come and kill your children. Join the fight!" The main revolution song, *Ya Heif* (For Shame), rang out in the streets:

*Young people heard that freedom was at the gates, they went to call out for it
They saw the guns; they said these are their brothers, they wouldn't shoot.*

But they did shoot . . . with real bullets.

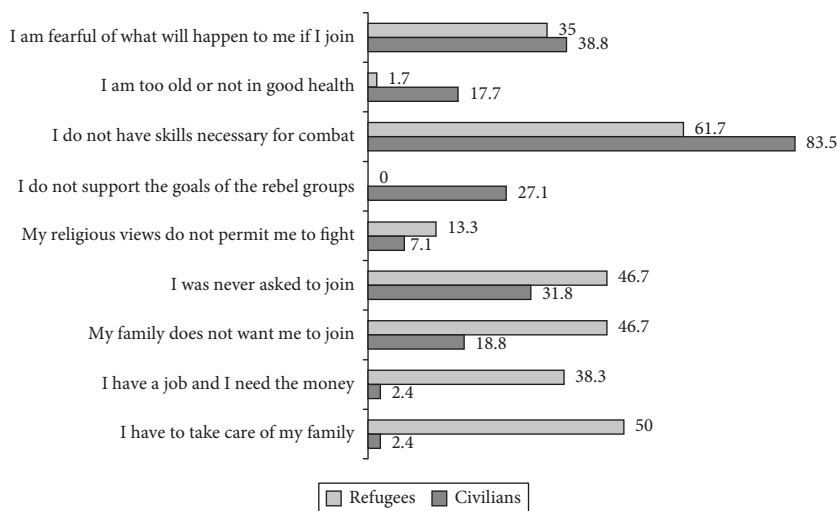
We are dead. . . on our brothers' hands and in the name of national security.

Even fighters walked the streets yelling, “Whoever does not participate does not love Syria!”

Activists also boldly recruited government employees. They stood near government buildings with a phone number to call painted on homemade banners. Activists also obtained phone numbers of government employees and contacted them, one by one, via the WhatsApp messenger. Some activists even procured working radios connected to internal regime channels, and invited members of the military to defect and walk over the frontline to join the FSA. This tactic was particularly successful. In many cases, regime army leadership had already deserted, leaving soldiers to defect without fear of repercussion.

However, despite the best recruiting efforts, some civilians would not mobilize. Though many supported the revolution’s goals, they would not give up civilian status and become active combatants. The reasons were interesting, especially compared to those of refugees.

Based on the survey of civilians and refugees (Graph 2.2), although there was some fear among civilians (38.8 percent), most cited not having the skills necessary for combat (83.5 percent) as their reason for not joining. This is not an answer of convenience, but a reflection of what they believe about their part in the war effort. By continuing in their prewar civilian



Graph 2.2. Survey of refugees and civilians: reasons for not joining rebel groups.

jobs, they believed themselves more useful to the cause. In other words, instead of taking up weapons and becoming an inexperienced soldier, a baker could be more useful in baking bread for fighters because that was also a necessary job. In fact, counterintuitively in some cases, it was physically safer for civilians to be on the frontline; they were less likely to be shelled in regime airstrikes, as the regime did not want to target its own troops.

Even civilians who indicated that they did not join for age- and health-related reasons (18 percent), those who were never recruited (32 percent), or those who faced family pressure not to join (19 percent) still acted in supporting roles. They would help with first aid, cook food, bring water and tea, and provide places for fighters to sleep and shower. Most of the time, civilians kept the doors of their houses open so fighters could hide if they needed. Civilians would sometimes volunteer for more dangerous tasks like watching the road, taking guard shifts (so fighters could sleep), and spying on the government troops.

Some civilians even officially organized into pseudo-military units. For example, in Homs, a female group, “Banat Al-Waleed,” organized; according to their official media release, their aims were (1) providing first aid and care for the wounded; (2) providing food and medical care; (3) organizing weapons training for females; and (4) exposing and publishing Assad’s crimes. Only a minority of civilians did not join because they did not support the goals of the rebel groups (27 percent).

The logic of civilians was much different from that of refugees. Compared to the 50 percent of refugees whose main reason for not joining was family obligations, and the 10 percent who could not join because they had jobs, only less than 3 percent of civilians named those reasons. Apart from not having the necessary skills to fight, 19 percent of civilians said that they did not join because they did not support the goals of the group (compared to none of the refugees), and 12 percent said that they were simply afraid of what would happen.

Joining the Fight

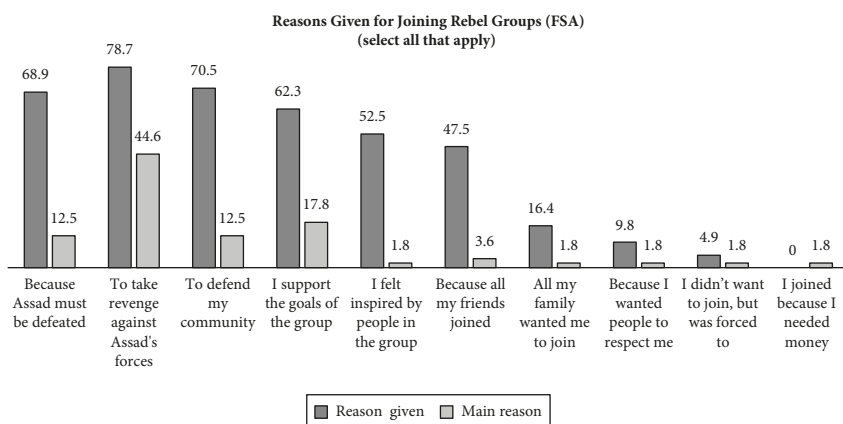
Despite the obvious risks and absence of prior civil war experience for most Syrians, as the conflict evolved, increasing numbers of civilians picked up weapons and joined the armed resistance. Within a year, rebels were no

longer just defending neighborhoods or fighting for freedom. Another, deeper cause surfaced and rose far above the others: the desire for revenge.

Nearly 45 percent of surveyed FSA fighters cited revenge against the Assad regime as their main reason for fighting, making it almost two times as important as the second most popular reason, and 78.7 percent listed it among their reasons (Graph 2.3). Another 68.9 percent fought “because Assad must be defeated.” Defending the community also ranked high as a reason (70.5 percent), though not as a main reason (12.5 percent). Other reasons, such as community and peer pressure (“because all my friends joined” or “my family wanted me to join”), were only minor. And although, in general, 52.5 percent of fighters mentioned that one of the reasons they joined was “they felt inspired by the people in the group,” this was far from being their main reason for joining; only 1.8 percent mentioned it as such.

Even if fighters thought about other reasons when joining, they clearly took up weapons to fight for the abstract goal of revenge and were less concerned about everything else, including money. (In actuality, the first groups were self-funded and required great personal contribution.) Now instead of slogans like “Freedom for the People,” militia propaganda became “Prepare yourself with the power to defend” and “Fuck Assad” hoisted on flagpoles and scrawled on buildings along with the names and photos of fallen fighters.

In addition, out of 310 randomly selected early FSA inauguration videos posted on the web, all but two stated revenge and community defense as



Graph 2.3. Survey of fighters: reasons for joining rebel groups.

the main reasons for their formation.⁸ It was at the root of every group's mission statement: "We promise God and our Syrian family that we'll revenge the martyrs' blood and the moans of our prisoners and the tears of the bereaved. We will free our homeland from the criminals and whoever stands by their side" (Wa'd Allah Al-Haq battalion); "Our objective is to stand in the face of the *majus* [animal worshippers] regime wholeheartedly and to support our people and families in the nearby areas whenever they get abused" (Omar Al-Mokhtar battalion); "Our objective is to protect civilians and peaceful demonstrations, and defend our religion, land and honor. We promise the regime and his criminal gangs that follow them we'll target whoever's hands are stained with the blood of our martyrs" (Al-Sahabi Al-Jaleel Abu Mousa Al-Ashaari battalion).

Surveyed members of Islamist groups joined the conflict for similar reasons: to take revenge against the Assad regime (79.6 percent), because Assad must be defeated (90 percent), and to defend the community (90 percent). In addition to these claims, however, they also wanted to build an Islamic state (71 percent), wanted to gain combat training and experience (71 percent), and had joined in response to a religious instruction or *fatwa*⁹ (63 percent). What is not clear is whether these are honest responses or just fighters repeating the "company line" of their particular group. To garner unguarded responses, the same fighters were also asked to consider the motives of their comrades for joining. To that question, the most popular reasons were far from religiously motivated, and matched those of the moderate fighters: to defeat the Assad regime (99 percent), to take revenge against Assad's forces (90 percent), and to defend their communities (98 percent).

To understand how those fighters' goals correlated with those of their openly Islamist groups, each was asked to clarify the main goal of his armed group. Again, the most popular answers were not religious. The main goals of one Islamist group were "to defeat Assad and every group supporting him," to "protect Muslims from criminals from Iran and Hezbollah," to "liberate Syria," to "stop the killings and rapes," "to free people from Assad's jails," and "to protect civilians." One fighter went into an even more detailed

⁸ Those two group leaders were only talking about religion in their speech.

⁹ On February 7, 2012, 107 of the most well-known Muslim scholars from various countries, representing various Islamic groups and organizations, called on Muslims and free people all over the world to support the Free Syrian Army (islam21c.com 2012).

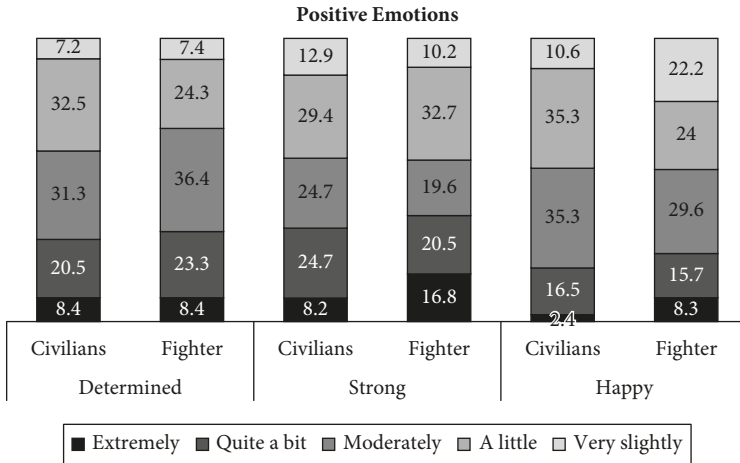
explanation: “If we are talking about now, the main goal of everyone is to defeat Assad. But after that we will have to decide what we want our country to be.” There is more about problems related with this opinion of fighters in Chapter 10.

To further confirm these findings, civilians who closely interacted with fighters were also asked their opinions on the reasons why fighters joined moderate and Islamist groups. The civilians generally confirmed the fighters’ own responses. Eighty-eight percent of civilians in Aleppo and Idlib said fighters joined the FSA because they wanted revenge on Assad. Civilians also noted that fighters supported the revolutionary goals of the group (76 percent) and also felt inspired by other people who were joining (58 percent). In racking up only a few votes, civilians strongly disagreed that fighters joined for money (2 percent) or respect (4 percent), or were forced to join (0 percent). There is no doubt that members of both Islamist and moderate groups had the same main reason for joining the fight: to defeat Assad and take revenge against him.

Why did fighters want revenge on Assad personally? Although the majority of fighters, both moderates and Islamists, indicated crimes against both “them and their family” and “Syrian people in general” (47 percent), an almost equal number of people cited revenge for his “crimes against Syrian people” (46 percent) only. Then a small minority (10 percent) said that they wanted revenge only for “crimes against them and their family.” In essence, the collective desire to defeat Assad was not personal grievance but a communal one.

Among Assad’s perceived crimes against the Syrian people were attacking peaceful demonstrators, arresting children in Daraa for writing anti-Assad graffiti,¹⁰ massacring hundreds in Homs in 2012, and even spending the majority of Syrian oil revenue on the regime army. Most of the time, not even regime troops were considered the object of revenge. Even concerning the chemical attacks, surveyed fighters put blame solely on Assad, while only slightly more than half of respondents blamed his forces. In addition, 15 percent of surveyed fighters believed Assad’s troops were not guilty at all in this incident.

¹⁰ On March 6, 2011, children wrote in graffiti, “Doctor, you are next” on a school wall, a clear reference to Bashar Assad, who is an eye doctor by training. The children were tortured and beaten before release.



Graph 2.4. Survey of civilians and fighters: experience of positive emotions.

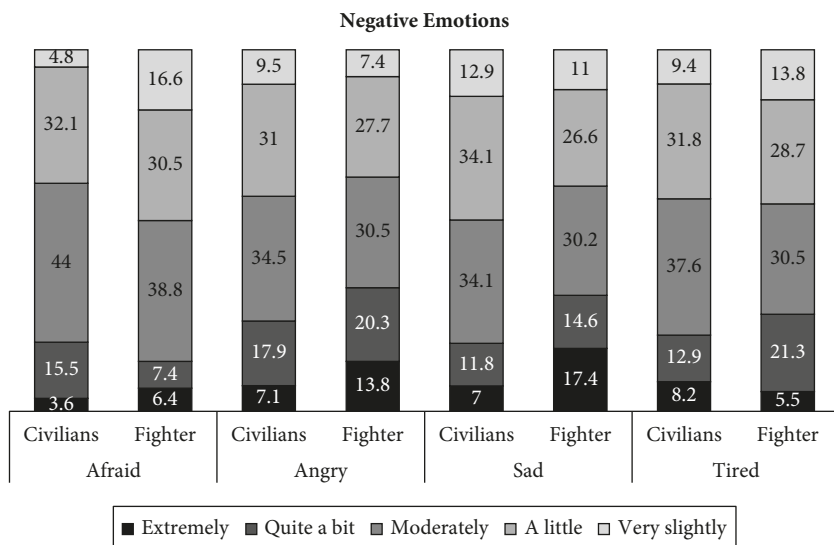
Sweet Revenge?

Overall, when compared to civilians, fighters were happier, most likely because they were acting on their grievances in a way in which they could see results. As one fighter explained, “We knew there were prisons in this village where people were tortured, so we were very happy when chosen for the mission of liberating them.” Others remembered dancing and celebrating the success of an operation. Fighters also felt slightly stronger than non-fighters. However, in terms of overall dedication to the goal, both civilians and fighters felt equally determined (Graph 2.4).

Revenge may have its emotional perks, but there is also an emotional downside. Fighters were extremely angry and extremely sad twice as often as civilians, and felt more exhausted (Graph 2.5). They were also twice as likely as their civilian counterparts to experience extreme fear.

The Risk Factor

Behaviorally, fighters differed from civilians in their risk tolerance. To the statement, “I am not afraid to take risks,” surveyed fighters were almost twice as likely to strongly agree (46 percent fighters vs. 21 percent civilians) and almost four times more likely to strongly disagree with the statement, “I



Graph 2.5. Survey of civilians and fighters: experience of negative emotions.

avoid risks whenever possible” (40 percent vs. 10 percent). Fighters tended to be risk-takers; in fact, sometimes such risk was a major problem for group leadership. For example, after major enemy operations and advances with major civilian casualties (such as gas attacks), many low-level fighters demanded a counter-attack that was absolutely not feasible and for which they were unprepared.

This risk-taking manifested itself in their willingness to engage in combat, which in turn colored their view of the future. They were much less concerned about both short- and long-term plans than civilians were. What they would be doing after the war was not important to 34 percent of fighters compared to 20 percent of civilians. Only 45 percent of fighters considered what they would be doing the next week very important (vs. 45 percent among civilians) and only 70 percent were concerned with what they would be doing the next day (vs. 87 percent among civilians). So even behaviorally, their main concern was fighting, and they were willing to take risks to be more effective in it.

When deciding whether to take on the risks of combat, most locals evaluated whether or not their desires to seek revenge and to defeat Assad were worth the sacrifices required. If the answer was “yes,” they joined. “Even if we lose a lot of people, it will be worth it,” explained one FSA

fighter when explaining the group's emotions during the first days of the revolution.

Following the same reasoning, even civilian family members were not against their relatives' risking their lives; indeed, they often encouraged it due to their own grievances. Abu Hassan, who joined the war in the very first days, remembers, "My mom lost her brother in Hama in 1982. She thought, 'It is time to get revenge,' and encouraged me to join the fight."¹¹ Even during one fighter's funeral, people comforted his mother by not only confirming that her son's death was honorable, but also reassuring her that his death would be avenged. One mother was told, "Your son's blood will not dry before we have revenge on those who killed him. We will fight until the end against the regime."

Consequently, at the beginning of the conflict in Syria, when almost everyone who wanted to join the fight was doing so, the only thing that mattered substantially in making that decision was the nonmaterial goal of defeating Assad. If a man wanted to contribute to this goal, he stayed to fight or support fighters; if he did not, he left.

Demobilization

In the business world, every labor market has turnover, and rebel forces are no different. No matter how strong their initial inclination to take up arms, many fighters also chose to put them down again. There were also those who had the choice to leave the battlefield made for them: the wounded fighters who could not continue fighting. Among the wounded, opinions and attitudes did not vary much from those of active fighters. Wounded fighters were only a little less likely to support "fighting until victory" than active fighters (88 percent of wounded, 90 percent of active). Those wounded also had a strong desire to return to combat, even though it was impossible for many.¹²

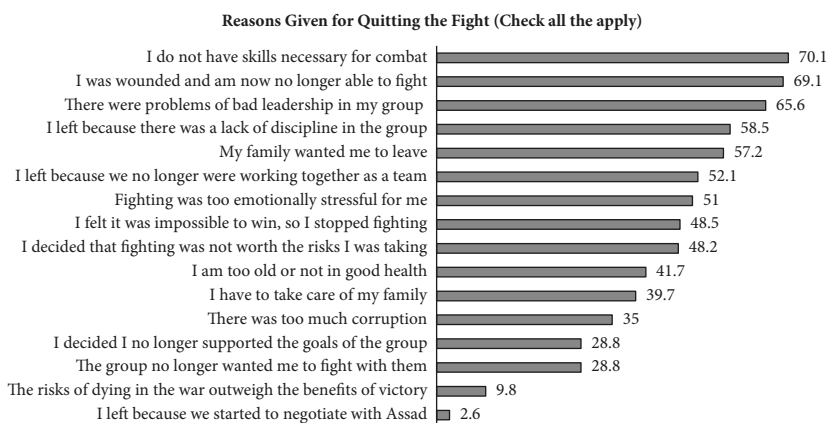
¹¹ Referring to the Hama massacre, when the Syrian Arab Army, under the orders of the country's then-dictator, Hafez al-Assad, besieged the town of Hama for twenty-seven days in order to quell an uprising against the government.

¹² Although 17 percent of surveyed wounded former fighters said they would definitely return to Syria to fight, it is not possible to make any generalizations. It is unclear how many of the surveyed could possibly go back to the frontline due to the severity of their injuries.

But there were also many who quit voluntarily and returned to civilian life and their prewar professions. Rich former fighters opened small shops and restaurants, while the educated returned to their previous occupations inside of Syria, in Turkey, and even in Europe and the United States. Those without a civilian profession relied mostly on aid or selling things in the market. Interestingly enough, these individuals decided to stop fighting for reasons similar to those who did not join to begin with, such as refugees, reasons that all boiled down to a lack of interest and a general disappointment in the nonmaterial goals of the war and the war itself.

In a survey (Graph 2.6), former fighters of both moderate and Islamist groups were asked why they were no longer fighting. For many, it took understanding their own limitations: more than 70 percent realized they were not good at fighting and generally not helpful to advancing the goal of the war; 51 percent, that it was too emotionally stressful; and 49 percent, that the risks associated with combat were just not worth it. One fighter from Ja'far al-Tayyar who left in 2014 after fighting for four years explained his reasoning this way: "After my fourth injury, losing my brother and all my friends in the group, and there were no more Syrians left in my city, it became emotionally hard to continue fighting. Nothing [was] holding me back now, and it [was] time to leave."

Another fighter, formerly with the Islamist group Fajr al Islam (now part of al-Nusra) before leaving in 2014, recalls,



Graph 2.6. Survey of former fighters: reasons for quitting the fight.

After the end of Alsehel battle with Shia militias, and the regime took control of the villages around our positions, I thought, “Why am I still fighting?” I had lost my right hand to a sniper shot, and when I was bleeding, no one could help because we simply did not have enough people. . . . we only had Kalashnikovs [AK47s], while the enemy had tanks and planes. I felt that God’s angels were helping us, but rationally I thought, “What can a left-handed man do in front of those tanks? Nothing”. . . so I found a way to get out of the city and ended up opening a small restaurant to sell falafel. Now the only thing I am fighting for is food for my kids.

Many former fighters had also become frustrated with the lack of organization in their groups. Bad leadership was an important factor for 65 percent of respondents while 59 percent pointed to the lack of discipline. More than 52 percent said their group was not working as a team anymore. Generally, if fighters were dissatisfied with the organization of their group, they simply switched groups, so these former fighters also had other important reasons, namely giving up on the cause for fighting: 48 percent of respondents felt that it was impossible to win the war and it was no longer worth the risk.

Another 10 percent of respondents mentioned other reasons as the most important ones for them to leave the battlefield, like the death of a mother or issues with the international community (“War won’t end until the international governments take their responsibilities”). A small percentage (less than 3 percent) fled because they were not able to fight the war against Assad they had initially mobilized for.¹³

Even with the benefits of separating themselves from the fight, these men paid a toll emotionally. In general, they felt significantly more ashamed than active members (36 percent vs. 18 percent), sadder (38 percent vs. 32 percent), weaker (24 percent of former fighters mentioned that they feel strong vs. 38 percent of active fighters), more tired (34 percent vs. 27 percent), and much more afraid (36 percent vs. 13 percent), all the while still feeling almost as angry (34 percent for both).

¹³ This reason was related to the opened front with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and included “ISIS took control of the area,” “I was arrested by ISIS,” “We were forced to join ISIS,” and “We had to run away from ISIS.”

Of former fighters who were asked whether they would go back to fight if given the opportunity, 42 percent said they would under certain conditions. The possible scenarios for return to combat confirmed a general disappointment in the goal and the fight as their main reasons for quitting. Given any solid prospect of victory, 43 percent said they would fight again. Many, for example, saw Western intervention as a potential game changer that would tip the balance in their favor. A strong majority (76 percent) claimed that they would fight again if the West were to intervene militarily. In addition, 56 percent would consider going back if their groups had better leaders, if they were paid more for fighting (48 percent) (self-supported fighters had run out of money), and if there were less group corruption (30 percent). And although these were secondary considerations, they were still important aspects of any decision to return to the fighting.

Conclusion

The pool of fighters for which armed groups in the rebel bloc compete are individuals who ignore the risks associated with combat to act upon their grievances. They join armed conflict because they want to achieve a nonmaterial goal, which can be achieved only through fighting. And they remain active fighters until they are killed or wounded or become disappointed either in the goal of the conflict or their role in it.

In the case of Syria, the main goal for the fighters was a desire for revenge against Assad for the crimes that he committed against Syrian people and, in some cases, them personally. Even the slightest deviation from the main goal by the group led to problems between fighters and their leaders. Many fighters left their groups as soon as they suspected that their leaders changed affiliation or preferences, as had happened in other civil wars.¹⁴

Such strong motivation of rebel fighters is also known to the enemy, and was used strategically by the Assad regime. The goal and related emotions are so crucial for fighters that sometimes in pursuit of the goal, they lose their capacity for rational decision making. In their choice to fight, for example, sometimes it was not easy even for commanders to slow fighters

¹⁴ Ben Oppenheim, Abbey Steele, Juan F. Vargas, and Michael Weintraub, "True Believers, Deserters, and Traitors: Who Leaves Insurgent Groups and Why," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 794–823.

down for strategic reasons. Members of the group Abu Ammarah remember that the biggest disagreement they had with their commander was because “the regime was advancing, and we all wanted to continue fighting, although we knew that we did not have enough ammunition. Our leaders had a hard time calming us down.”

While in this case the commander was thinking rationally and was able to stop his fighters, this was not always the case. In the Deir Ezzor neighborhood of Al Djura in 2012, seven hundred people were killed and many more arrested in three days. People who survived ran to the FSA headquarters and demanded weapons to go and fight Assad’s army. There were only around a hundred assault rifles available on the base, so one hundred people were armed and rushed to attack the government forces. The regime was counting on precisely this reaction and sat fully armed waiting to ambush those fighters. According to local activists, they killed as many as 60 percent of them.

3

Finding a Group That Fits

Choosing whether or not to join an armed rebellion is no longer the only decision a prospective local fighter must make. The highly fragmented insurgencies encountered in contemporary civil warfare mean he must also decide which group to join. In the Syrian civil war, this was a hard choice to make. Not only were there thousands of different armed groups fighting for the same goal, but each group differed in size, ideology, organization, effectiveness, and what kind of operations they executed (and at what danger level).

These choices also affected those already fighting. In previous civil wars, a fighter who was not satisfied with the rebel group could only choose to quit and return to civilian life. However, in contemporary insurgencies like Syria, an unsatisfied fighter simply switched to another group. Thus modern civil wars employ a more dynamic labor market that requires more sophisticated methods of recruitment and retention.

This fact gives rise to several pertinent topics covered in this chapter: how Syrian fighters chose a group initially, why some fighters chose to switch groups, how armed groups attracted and retained prospective fighters, and which groups rose to the top. My group comparisons will often feature popular major Islamist groups,¹ compared to different Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups that gradually lost popularity with fighters as the war progressed.²

As in the previous chapter, this chapter is based on a survey of 150 active fighters from both moderate and Islamist groups. The survey was conducted in 2013 in Aleppo and Idlib. In addition, in 2014, when the FSA started falling apart and Islamist groups began materializing and gaining power by attracting FSA fighters, about 150 fighters were surveyed on why they were switching between groups and how they chose which groups to

¹ Between 2011 and 2014, Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra were considered to be the most popular groups with ground-level fighters.

² I exclude the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) for the majority of my analyses in this chapter. They were fighting for a different goal and, as a result, were not popular with fighters interested in fighting Assad.

switch to. Individual opinion and decision-making questions were asked as multiple-choice questions, the answers of which were based on prior qualitative interviews with fighters. A respondent first had to choose all answers that applied, and then choose the most important one.

To examine recruitment and retention from the other side, that of the armed group, this chapter will also draw on fifteen extensive interviews with group leaders and a focus group conducted with seventeen members of different armed groups. This research, conducted by my local assistant in Turkey, helped me to better understand how armed groups approached the management of their manpower.

Who to Fight For?

In the beginning, the Syrian conflict began like the internet startup boom of the 1990s: everyone used their own savings to buy necessities (hardware and office supplies) and worked from “their parents’ basement.” In the first year, groups were bands of self-sufficient members within a neighborhood, with logistics handled at the individual level. When it came to weapons, many joining civilians already had small arms at home, and regime army defectors brought their guns with them. Those who did need a weapon simply bought one. Firearms had been freely available since the war in Iraq, and Syria was rife with ubiquitous weapons dealers willing to sell to anyone.

Logistically, at that time, armed groups were operating as insurgencies in or close to their own neighborhoods, so food and lodging were also not a problem. Since fighters were based in their own neighborhoods, family members and other civilians adopted the role of combat support units. While fighters manned their positions, wives cooked at home and sent children with prepared food to the frontlines. Other civilians supplied fighters with portable ovens for reheating meals and making fresh coffee.³ For anything else fighters needed—rest, sleep, showers, or surfing the internet—they went home in their off time. And because public services such as hospitals were still functional, the few wounded were easily able to obtain care.

³ During the battle of Aleppo that started during Ramadan in 2012, in addition to food, civilians were bringing fighters sweets for *iftar*.

This division of roles between civilian supporters and fighters was, unknowingly, something already outlined in existing insurgency manuals. According to the operations manual of one insurgency group from the Russian Caucasus that later moved to Syria and established a major foreign fighters unit, “A leader of the fighting group should also organize non-fighting units comprised of local civilians to establish: 1) intelligence and counter intelligence; 2) propaganda and media (journalists, religious clerics, teachers, activists, member of civil society); 3) medical unit; 4) financial support unit; 5) supply unit (shop keepers, providers of a shelter, restaurant and bakery workers, drivers, mechanics).”⁴

As the war intensified, the frontline became more active and combat operations more sophisticated. Small bands of fighters, who once only had to ensure their own neighborhood’s safety, now had to attack enemy checkpoints and even well-guarded military bases. New issues begin to emerge and, with them, the need for more organization and support at the group level. Insurgency groups had to transform into full-fledged, smoothly functioning armed forces.

The first urgent issue of the intensifying war were combat logistics and organization. With the regime operating at full capability, rebel fighters had to provide an adequate response. Targets became more sophisticated and hard-to-get weapon systems were expensive. As time progressed, even ammunition for the existing weapons had become harder to find and more expensive to buy.⁵ In Hama, one interviewed fighter recalled how, “all of a sudden, everything changed—we found ourselves fighting a real war against a professional and well-equipped enemy, and we were absolutely not prepared for it.”

In addition, as pro-Assad forces attacked the FSA and arrested its members, small neighborhood groups had to relocate further away. Losing the logistical advantages of home field increased everyday expenses. And moving to the countryside away from regime-controlled territories also increased the need for cars and gas.

All of these changes signaled the second urgent problem faced by fighters—funding. The cost of fighting skyrocketed, and fighters were running out of savings. And as civilian jobs in the war-torn country started to

⁴ <http://alisanad.com/abu-ahmad-ad-dagestani-vojna-slabyh-sushhnost-partizanskoj-vojny-chast-4/>

⁵ Before the war, bullets were 25 lira. Three years into the conflict, they were 200 lira.

disappear, fighters could not even rely on their families' income anymore. Food also became more scarce and expensive, and fewer consumer goods were being produced, so most goods had to be imported. High inflation made virtually everything unaffordable.⁶

This was the turning point for fighters who started perceiving groups as organizations that could help them achieve their combat goals. With this new awareness, the gap between effective and ineffective groups became apparent, and prospective fighters began to consider group membership alongside of their decision to fight. Instead of just looking for groups that were geographically close, they began asking themselves questions like, "Which group will best help me achieve my goals and utilize my skills and sacrifices most effectively?" and "Which group would I feel most comfortable in?"

But, with time, groups begin to differ, and fighters found out about these differences through other fighters. Fighters not only discussed their groups with each other and prospective fighters, but because groups often conducted joint operations, differences between groups very quickly became common knowledge on the frontlines.⁷ This information not only helped new fighters choose groups more deliberately, but it also led to active fighters switching groups.

The "Dream Company"

In the business world, when evaluating a company to work for, prospective employees look for a good fit for themselves, one that aligns with their own personal needs and goals. In doing so, they evaluate a company's mission, branding, success, human resource policies, culture, compensation, insurance, and benefits. Once the war was in full swing, fighters began to choose rebel groups using the same criteria.

As seen by the results of the fighters survey (Graph 3.1), the majority of fighters (75 percent) from both moderate and Islamist groups based their decision to join a group on its effectiveness and dedication to their same overall goal: carrying out important and successful missions against Assad.

⁶ The exchange rate of the dollar to the Syrian lira collapsed from US\$1 to 50 Syrian lira in 2011 to US\$1 to 250 lira in 2014. Before the war, one egg cost 7 lira and a bottle of Coca-Cola cost 25 lira, but three years into the war, they cost 27 lira and 100 lira respectively.

⁷ Because groups were not large enough to conduct major operations alone, they coordinated with other groups.



Graph 3.1. Survey of fighters: reasons for not joining other groups.

Fighters joined the conflict to act on their grievance and have revenge on the enemy, so they wanted to be part of the group that was causing the most damage and suffering to the Assad regime.

Because of this, the majority of Syrian fighters never even considered joining ISIS after its official goal of establishing a caliphate became known. Most fighters were even against their group cooperating with ISIS. Even among members of Islamist groups, the reason that “it is the only group that truly fights for Islam” was the second *least* important (38 percent), while the least important was the share of power a group held (31 percent), because fighters understood that they were all fighting for the one goal.

Second, fighters wanted a group that provided reliable support—especially for their families—with some level of infrastructure. Almost 74 percent of fighters joined a group because, in the event of serious maiming or death, the group would provide money or goods to their family. Support through training (57 percent) and a good paycheck (43 percent) also helped establish a group as desirable.

Camaraderie was another big selling point, with 61 percent of fighters saying they felt close to people in a particular group, and 59 percent joining a certain group because their friends had. Fifty-eight percent also cited not only friends and family but an inspirational leader as a reason they joined.

Better Opportunities

Because the goals and policy of a group often changed with a change in leadership, fighters constantly reevaluated their situations. Just like in any

other industry, when individuals are no longer satisfied with a company's mission, salary, or work environment, they will look for a better company to work for. By 2015, four years into the conflict, that scenario was very like what was going on with the fighters, and it was not uncommon to find one who had changed groups three or four times.

Early on, switching between armed groups was easy. Groups would rather have fighters move on than be dissatisfied because a lack of dedication made fighters a hazard instead of an asset. And due to the nature of society in Syria, there was always a big probability a fighter knew someone (a relative or a neighbor) in the group he wanted to switch to, so he only needed to make contact and ask whether the new group was willing to take him. Even if a fighter came to a new group with no weapon, perhaps having borrowed it from someone in his earlier group and had to leave it, it wasn't because his former group was angry with him. There were no hard feelings or negative repercussions for leaving, and fighters entering new groups were warmly welcomed. As one interviewed fighter explained, "The group did not matter; we were still fighting for the same cause."⁸

One important reason fighters would often switch groups was their leadership switching alliance and, as a result, the group's main goal. For those interested in fighting Assad, any pledged allegiance to ISIS was a major shift in goal, and many fighters were not interested. Members of the Abbas group remember their main reason for leaving as their commander's "relations with ISIS," and many members from a group outside of Deir Ezzor left after their commander had "pledged allegiance to ISIS without the knowledge of the fighters."

When the goal of the groups matched that of the fighters, the majority of surveyed fighters also changed groups for organizational reasons: their old group did not take care of its fighters (52 percent), did not do well in combat (and as a result did not utilize fighters' skills properly) (45 percent), or had become too corrupt (32 percent). For 32 percent, it was because their new group was more powerful, or they were now safer and better protected (31 percent).

Religious motives were significantly less popular. Although 22 percent said they had changed groups mainly because their new group was the only one that "truly fights for Islam," it was very likely respondents

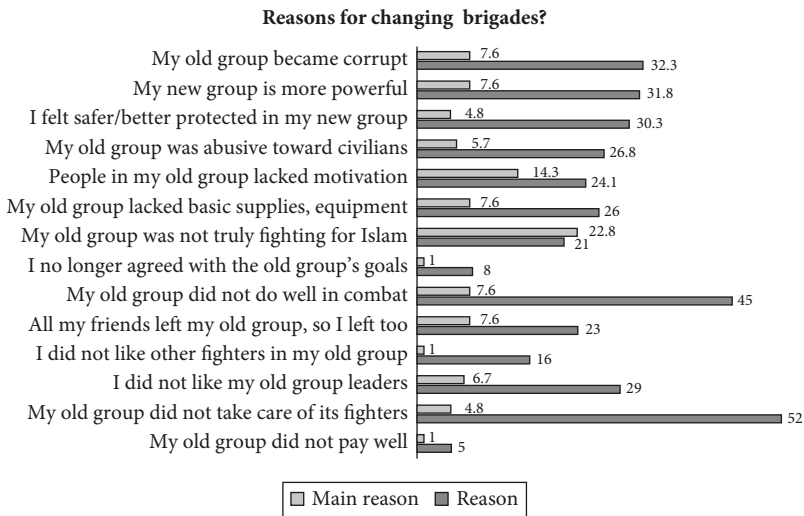
⁸ In the survey, 74 percent of fighters reported that they felt close to members of other groups inside the rebel camp.

assumed this was the answer they should give, taking into account their affiliation with Islamist groups. When the word “Islam” was not specifically mentioned and the answer was framed more generally (“I do not agree with my old group’s goals”), then only 8 percent of fighters agreed with the statement.

Also, as an additional question to check the importance of religion in the choice of the group, fighters were asked why they believed others were fighting. They confirmed that the majority of local fighters in Syria were still fighting for democracy (85 percent) and to defeat Assad (73 percent), *not* to impose sharia law and build an Islamic state. This further supports the idea that fighters who switched from moderate to Islamist groups did not switch because of ideology per se.

Furthermore, in qualitative interviews with fighters who began with the FSA and later switched to Islamist groups (Graph 3.2), almost all of reasons were nonreligious: “My friends left my old group and I left with them,” “I didn’t like the people in my old group,” “My friend got injured, and they didn’t support him,” “I was with my old group until I fought with Ahrar al-Sham. I liked their way of treating fighters, and I joined.”

Thus after years of civil war, fighters once living on revenge alone became more interested in being part of effective groups that could also provide



Graph 3.2. Survey of fighters. reasons for changing armed groups.

individual benefits (basics such as food and salary) and combat organization (training, logistical and supply support, and qualified leadership) to help them act on their grievance.

And as fighters became more sophisticated in their choices, certain groups began to pull ahead while others lagged. A fighter with the 150-member Soqoor Idlib, one of the more popular groups in 2014, explained, “Every time we’d win a fight, we’d get more supporters and potential members.” For others, their lack of organization and resources prevented them from expanding. “Some fighters wanted to join our battalion, but we did not have much to offer,” said one fighter from a 122-member group operating outside of Deir Ezzor. “We only provided heavy weapons training, like operating tanks.” One member of the eighty-member group, Abbas, commented, “We used to constantly get fighters until the beginning of 2014. After that, no one wanted to join because we only offered a salary, food, and cigarettes.” A member of Sarayah al-Nasar, which had dwindled to twenty-six fighters by 2014, said it was a lack of outside financial support that discouraged people from joining them.

Developing Human Resource Policies

The wife of an Ahrar al-Sham fighter explains:

Before the revolution, my husband was a normal student, no different from his peers, spending most of his time with his girlfriend and at social events. But when the revolution started, he and his brother became activists and started participating in peaceful demonstrations. He organized film protests and murals. One day, police detained him. They put him in prison, where he was regularly beaten and tortured. After he was released, he was so angry, he decided to get revenge by all possible means. At first he joined the FSA, but soon after realized they were not organized enough to inflict significant damage on Assad, so he joined Ahrar al-Sham.

He was killed in 2013.

Because the first priority of fighters who joined the war in its early days was to act on their grievance and fight against Assad, they looked for the groups that would make them the most effective at that. On this score, two

groups in particular stood apart from the rest of the rebel bloc—Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra.

First, those groups had a reputation of being the most effective. In this respect, Jabhat al-Nusra (and Ahrar al-Sham to a smaller degree) capitalized heavily on its association with al-Qaeda. While at the beginning of the conflict most groups in Syria did not have any history or, consequently, reputation, Jabhat al-Nusra both was known and had a good reputation for effectiveness thanks to its affiliation with al-Qaeda.

Second, Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra were known for participating in the most important and destructive operations against Assad. While many groups were holding checkpoints inside the rebel-controlled territory, those groups were on the frontline and sometimes even conducting operations into enemy territory. In the interview many members of al-Nusra proudly mentioned how many *ribats* (frontline positions) their group was holding, compared to other groups. Also, when asked which operations fighters wanted to participate in, liberating prisons and taking control of regime headquarters were named as the most desirable, operations Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra were particularly known for. By participating in prison liberation operations, fighters were able to act on their desire to help people who, often just like them, had been imprisoned for standing against the regime; an operation against a regime headquarters enabled fighters to directly act on their grievance and desire for revenge.

Third, the most direct way to enable an individual to be a better fighter is providing him with a military training. While the majority of groups could only afford basic skill development—how to use grenade launchers (RPGs) and automatic weapons—groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra ran full-scale, several-month-long basic training camps, where, usually with the help of professional instructors, recruits studied basic and specialized disciplines, such as how to use explosive devices and sniper skills. One fighter who had gone through Jabhat al-Nusra training explained in an interview, “Compared to the previous group I was with, Jabhat al-Nusra’s training was serious, like in a real army. For the first six days, we mostly ran and after that they gave us weapons and started teaching us how to use them. Sometimes the training was unnecessarily harsh, though. In winter we had to be in formation wearing only our T-shirts.”

Prospective fighters especially valued training programs because they not only made them more effective in their ultimate goals but could also potentially save their lives in combat. In one case, after being asked, “What

should your group have done?” a member of Soqoor Idlib answered, “Strong military training . . . like some of the other big groups.” For some it was so important that fighters with Ahrar al-Sham said it was highlights of the training camp in al-Sham’s recruitment video that was the main selling point for them. Some groups also provided religious classes for their fighters in mosques and taught illiterate members of the group how to read and write.

Finally, to take part in a long-term conflict, a fighter had to be able to afford it. With time, fighting in a conflict moves from a part-time occupation to a full-time job, and a fighter loses his other sources of income. He has to rely on an armed group for support. In addition, since public goods provision in the time of an armed conflict largely stops, armed groups also have to take that role upon themselves. These kinds of policies became a clear dividing line between the groups that grew and those that dwindled.

Most of the groups dwindled. After four years of intensive war in Syria, the majority of moderate groups were in no position to offer substantial pay or incentives to their fighters. However, a small number of groups, like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham,⁹ were still able to offer much more (the reasons for which will be discussed in the following chapters), elevating them to top-choice status among fighters.

Pay and incentive policies are some of the most important topics in the human resource and labor economics literature. These policies provide guidelines for a business entity’s decisions in a number of financial areas—market rate for pay, merit pay, and incentive¹⁰—and are at the root of attracting suitable employees, retaining effective ones, and encouraging improvements in performance. So one of the most important policies was pay. Responses from interviewed fighters serving in moderate, FSA-affiliated groups highlight a range of policies. One fighter with Al Muhajireen Ila Allah said, “We didn’t have salaries. Sometimes we didn’t even have food or bullets. We lived in houses together, but we kept food separately.” Fighters with Bait al-Maqdes were only provided food and cigarettes. A fighter with al-Zahraa said that in lieu of salaries, they were not only given food and

⁹ Although ISIS was also offering significant incentives to their fighters, because it was fighting for a different goal, the majority of Syrians interested in fighting Assad did not consider joining it.

¹⁰ Wayne F. Cascio, *Managing Human Resources* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1986); Scott A. Snell, Shad S. Morris, and George W. Bohlander, *Managing Human Resources* (Ontario, Canada: Nelson Education, 2015).

cigarettes, “but the military council pays awards and compensation from time to time.”

When financial situations improved in some groups, fighters did receive pay. “After we received sponsors,” one fighter with Soqoor Idlib said, “each fighter, whether he was single or married, got \$40 a month.” Another fighter, with Abu Ammarah, said that after the group received sponsors, “a single fighter received a monthly salary of \$50, and a married one, \$70. Also from time to time we received bonuses, like vegetables and meat.”

At the same time Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra provided the highest salaries on the market, almost double everyone else’s (around \$160).¹¹ Even higher salaries were paid to fighters who had lost brothers or sons in the war and were supporting several families. And bonus items would include not only food but goods, like cellphones. Incentive pay was also available for heroic acts and successful operations. A fighter in Hama who destroyed several enemy tanks was given an expensive car as a bonus.¹² According to one former fighter with Jabhat al-Nusra, someone particularly good with his weapon might be rewarded with a weapon upgrade.

Because basic supplies like food and hygiene items were so difficult to get in war-torn Syria, even groups that paid salaries also provided their members with goods imported from Turkey and distributed through the groups’ aid offices. According to fighters, in the rebel camp, Jabhat al-Nusra provided the most generous provision to their members. Every month, the group distributed “nutrition baskets” to the members’ families. These baskets included food necessities like rice, sugar, beans, and cooking oil, as well as non-food items such as mattresses, hygiene kits, and even diapers if a fighter had young children.

Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and other groups would also house on-base amenities like kitchens where fighters would cook for the whole group. Although there were civilian kitchens in many towns, those on military compounds were usually stocked with more meat, thus considered the better option. Groups even cut deals with local vendors. One group contracted with a local baker to provide bread for the fighters several days a

¹¹ It was not universally higher across the frontlines, but, according to interviewed fighters, their salaries were always higher than in other groups on the same frontline.

¹² This information was not from members of the group but from a conversation with local activists in 2015.

week. In exchange, the group secured safe delivery of the bakery's supplies across frontlines.

Some of the groups located in remote areas also had their on-base stores, making shopping more convenient for fighters. Because the stores were non-profit, they were less expensive than civilian stores, another plus. As with food vendors, these groups also made arrangements with local businesses who, in exchange for goods delivered through the frontlines, gave discounts to the group's members.

A second important policy was hours and vacations. As with other policies, each group managed the balance between on- and off-duty time differently. According to one member of Abu Ammarah located in Aleppo, their time was split equally between the frontline and rest, but there were no days off. One member of Soqoor Idlib reported no days off, "and we were on the frontlines for more than 75 percent of the day." For those in Al Muhajireen, "Depending on the fight, sometimes we had to stay on the frontline for twenty-four hours or more. Otherwise it was only eight hours a day." For another group close by Deir Ezzor, there were no days off, and "sometimes we were on the frontline for two weeks, then we were rotated with another group." Someone from Abbas had eight hours a day on the frontline and a day off each week. One former fighter with Jabhat al-Nusra said their vacation policy worked more like a reward system: "When we fought hard and liberated several towns in the Idlib province, our military leader told most of us, especially the Aleppo guys like me, to go take one to two weeks of vacation in our hometowns."

There were also a number of fringe benefits that can come from being affiliated with the right armed group. One of those was marriage. After five years of war, the only people in the war zone with any kind of money were fighters from the wealthier groups, so many local families considered them the best marriage partners for their girls. Thus the more powerful groups, like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, provided fighters with better bargaining power. Even the brides-to-be were more interested in marrying men from the stronger groups.¹³ Because fighters unofficially compete with each other to have more wives, this fringe benefit was crucial.

¹³ The marriage market was very dynamic. Usually fighters did not even meet their wives before marrying. Matchmaking was mostly done in refugee camps by a special woman (*khataba*) who herself was associated with the group (for example, a wife of the leader). Her job was to evaluate prospective brides, choosing the ones she thought would make good wives. She primarily looked for virgins, thirteen to eighteen years old, with fair skin, fair hair, and a curvy shape. Intellect and education, on

Because of the war, most prospective husbands could not pay *al mahr* (brides' price), but some groups would give a small allowance for the fighters' weddings. These allowances varied by group and at which point in the conflict the marriage took place. In 2013, some groups paid their fighters \$700, but by 2015, the wedding allowance had decreased to \$100. In addition to financial benefits, some groups might give fighters two to ten days' reprieve from the frontline for a honeymoon.

There were other benefits as well. A group might help family members find civilian jobs, which were rare in Syria. In some areas, it was possible to get a job with a nongovernmental organization (the most lucrative job) only through contacts with an armed group, and usually those jobs were taken by family members of fighters and group leaders. Being affiliated with a group (as a fighter or his family member) could also mean easier passage through checkpoints. Being part of a highly respected group like Jabhat al-Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham also saved money at checkpoints because fighters were not charged "tolls," which in 2015 were around \$1 per passenger at each of many checkpoints on one road.¹⁴ Being affiliated with a powerful group also afforded members and relatives easier access to different parts of the town—places where even civilians were not allowed.

These immediate benefits were important, but given the dangerous nature of the job, having good insurance was also something high on a fighter's priority list. The worst was if a fighter got seriously wounded. Who would take care of him, and how would his family afford treatment? Then, of course, there was also the matter of what would happen to his family if he were killed. So some of the better groups provided medical care and "insurance" of sorts.

Medical care on the battlefield and support for the wounded were important issues for prospective fighters, and groups had to work hard to solve them. The problem was not only money (substantial investment was needed to organize adequate medical care on the battlefield). The absence of doctors, the difficulty obtaining medical supplies, and the general

the other hand, were relatively unimportant. The youngest and most attractive girls were reserved for group leaders. Families tried to befriend the *khataba*; wherever she went, the families showed off their daughter in her best outfit and the most makeup.

¹⁴ As one example, there were as many as twenty-eight checkpoints between Deir Ezzor and the Turkish border. So although the first (Turkish) checkpoints collected the most money, others also got their share. Fighters were also confiscating cellphones, laptops, and other electronics of passersby at these secondary checkpoints.

remoteness of the locations made providing healthcare more than just difficult; at times, it was virtually impossible.

Members of our focus group revealed different group policies regarding medical and insurance benefits among their different groups (names listed in parentheses):

“One of our fighters had been a medical student, so he organized a medical first-aid point. The group was unable to pay for treatments; but they would take the wounded to Turkey or to the main hospitals in the city.” (Al Muhajireen Ila Allah, 150 members)

“The wounded were taken to the field hospital or, if necessary, specialized hospitals where the group covered all the expenses. But they didn’t give money to the wounded.” (Mohasan city, forty members)

“If wounded, a fighter was transferred to the field hospital. If he needed surgery, the group paid for it and any subsequent treatment, even in Turkey.” (Deir Ezzor countryside, 122 members)

“When someone was injured, we took him to a field hospital, and the treatment was free. If he needed more medicine, we bought it from Turkey. The group also gave his family money for living expenses during treatment.” (Abu Ammarah, 100 members)

Some groups, especially Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, went further and opened their own first-aid medical facilities. Some were only small, two- or three-bed clinics in an ordinary civilian house that moved with the frontline, while others were more permanent ten- to fifteen-bed mini-hospitals further from the combat zone. Although other fighters could also access healthcare at these places, most knew which groups these facilities belonged to. In the event of severe injuries, wounded fighters were stabilized on the battlefield and then transferred outside of the country, where the group continued to pay for their treatment. When a regular Ahrar al-Sham fighter suffered an eye injury as a result of an explosion in 2012, he was sent to Turkey for extensive surgery, and the group paid more than \$13,000 for his treatment.

Sometimes these medical benefits were extended, in part, to a fighter’s immediate family. If a child or wife was injured, a good group might provide a car to take the family member to a hospital in another town and donate a small amount of money for medicine.

As fatalities increased, funerals and family protection also became important issues. In some cases, groups might provide regular material

support for the families of their fallen brothers-in-arms, as well as the deceased fighter's salary. Funerals might be completely organized and paid for by the group. For fighters killed in enemy-controlled territories where bodies could not be returned home and families could not attend funerals, it was up to the group to find a place for the soldier's grave and conduct a funeral.¹⁵

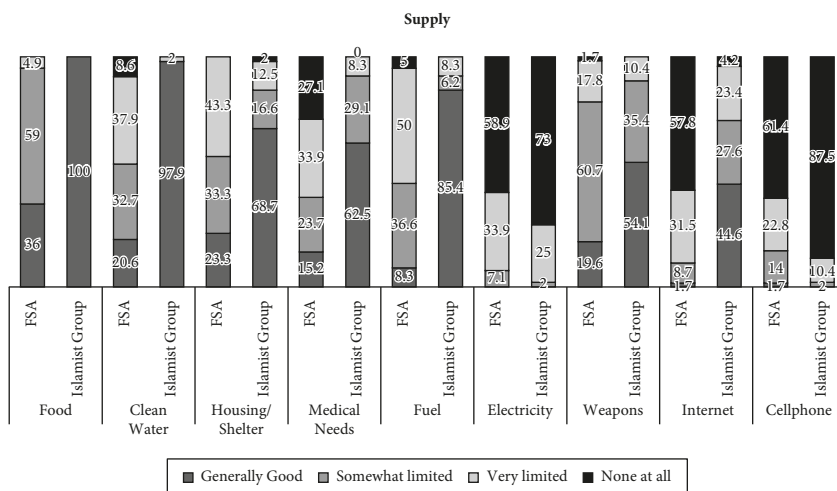
These benefits, as others, varied from group to group. Fighters with Bait al-Maqdes and Alkhadraa reported that their groups gave nothing to the families of deceased fighters, while a member of Abdallah Ibn al-Zoubair reported that "sometimes the group provided, but not always." The group Abu Ammarah usually gave money to the family of the fallen, but mainly those who were married and the only provider for the family. "In addition to organizing the funeral, we pay the family of a killed fighter," said one member of Mohammad. A member of an anonymous group from the Deir Ezzor province said, "In addition to paying a lump sum to the family of the fallen, the group pays a monthly salary (if the family needs it)."

Though these death benefits were helpful, they were not long-term solutions because the wives and children of the deceased were often uneducated or unable to work (and sometimes not permitted to). To help remedy this, some groups found other ways of ensuring help for the family. In 2012, the Eagles of Islam group provided a one-time payment of \$1,000 to any fighter who would marry the widow of a deceased comrade. This is not an uncommon occurrence because it is within the rules of Islam (by their interpretation) for one man to have up to four wives. Such a practice was cultivated not only by this group but by the fighting communities in general, with those declining to marry a widow occasionally ridiculed. One fighter who chose not to marry a widow was chastised for being selfish because the widow needed support.

Islamist Groups or FSA?

According to the fighters themselves, Islamist groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra had several advantages over the FSA groups.

¹⁵ Finding a place for a grave on the frontline is not an easy task because funeral gatherings are often a target of enemy attack. In extreme cases, fighters have to be buried in the basements of civilian houses so that the process of grave digging is not visible from the air.



Graph 3.3. Survey of fighters: armed groups supply.

First, Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra were significantly better supplied than the FSA groups (Graph 3.3). All of the surveyed Islamist group members reported their group's food situation as "generally good" (compared to 36 percent of FSA members); 98 percent of Islamist group members were satisfied with access to drinking water (compared to only 20 percent of the FSA); 69 percent considered their housing situation generally good (compared to 23 percent of FSA fighters); and 85 percent of Islamist group members considered their groups' fuel supply to be satisfactory (compared to only 8 percent of FSA members). Members of Islamist groups also reported much better access to healthcare (62 percent vs. 15 percent of FSA members) and the internet (44 percent vs. only 2 percent of FSA fighters). A similar pattern emerged when group members were asked about access to weapons. More than half of surveyed Islamist group members said they had good access to weapons compared to only 19 percent of FSA members.¹⁶

Some fighters in other groups were openly jealous of Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, because, as one fighter explained, "We are all fighting for the same goal, so why do their fighters have significantly bigger salaries,

¹⁶ The situation with electricity and cellphones was slightly worse in Islamist groups, but it could be related to where they were stationed (rural vs. urban areas and cellphone coverage).

their own ambulances and hospitals, and their severely wounded treated in Turkey?”

When one former al-Nusra fighter was asked why he chose the group, he said, “I joined because so many people told me they had resources and I would never run out of ammunition and bullets. And their relief office that supports fighters and their families is really good and gets lots of funding from either the Gulf or oil exports.” So four years into the war, while most FSA and Islamist groups were losing their fighters, some groups, especially Islamist groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, were gaining them.

Through this and their other benefits, Jabhat al-Nusra not only attracted the most dedicated fighters from the outset and retained them, they made those members even more effective. First, their fighters were better trained. Second, their fighters were able to focus only on their goal without having to worry about how to provide enough food for their families. Third, they were healthier and had more energy because they ate more nutritious foods. And finally, they were more willing to take risks in combat because they knew they would be taken care of if they were wounded, and their families would be taken care of if they were killed.

When one former Jabhat al-Nusra fighter was asked to pitch his group to my Syrian male research assistant as if he were a prospective member, he said, “Not only does Jabhat al-Nusra have stable funding, it is self-funding. We always get our salaries by the end of the month, and our payments are rarely delayed. We also have great specialists who repair our weapons and our cars, and those technicians only work with us. Finally, you would always find yourself on the frontline fighting against Assad, while other groups were busy making deals.”

Conclusion

Every year, *Forbes* magazine lists the best companies to work for, ranking firms based on the following criteria: (1) job growth, voluntary turnover, and the number of applicants; (2) training provided for salaried and hourly employees; (3) compensation and benefits for hourly and salaried positions (including healthcare coverage); and (4) diversity initiatives, percentage of minorities, and nondiscrimination policies. Although there is no such *Forbes* list of armed groups in Syria, the criteria fighters used to evaluate

and choose between groups was quite similar (probably except for the last point about “diversity initiatives”).

The main reason for a fighter to join an armed conflict was grievance, so he looked for the group that helped him achieve his major goal of fighting Assad. The group participating in the biggest number of important operations and providing their fighters with benefits enabled fighters to concentrate on fighting. Salaries, for example, made a fighter more at ease, but it also made him more effective in fighting because he did not need to spend time thinking about how to provide for his family. Medical care and money paid to the families of the fallen allowed fighters to take more risks and, as a result, create a more deadly fighting force.

It took the benefits and effectiveness in achieving a fighter’s goal to sell a group. So on one side, although ISIS was offering fighters major benefits, its goals were not of interest to Syrians who wanted to fight the Assad regime. As a consequence, ISIS was not able to recruit dedicated local fighters. On the other side, groups that were fighting the Assad regime but were poorly organized and funded also lost their fighters.

That left only a few groups (like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham) that had similar goals to those of fighters and enough resources and vision to support and invest in their fighters. By paying them competitive salaries, providing additional benefits, training them in military camps, ensuring adequate medical care in case of injury, and being effective on the battlefield, those groups increased their share of power within the rebel bloc.

4

Making a Rebel Group Work

Raising the level of faith is the shortest way to polarize the people who live in the region which we manage. There is a difference between the people accepting our administration so that we may provide security for them and so forth and between joining our ranks and working towards our goals and training and battling alongside us, and so forth. Raising the level of the faith of a society in this condition facilitates polarizing those people toward our active ranks.

Abu Bakr Naji, *Management of Savagery*

To people living in developed countries, \$40 and a nutrition basket a month is not much of a salary. But in a war-torn country like Syria—where many people skip meals because they cannot afford to eat—these benefits are significant, especially when it is possibly the only income for the majority of households. As a result, the salaries and benefits offered by the stronger groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham made them popular not only with dedicated fighters, but also with men just trying to make a living. These were men not really interested in fighting for the group, and definitely not in dying for it, but as the war progressed, they simply needed to provide for their family. Sometimes women even forced their sons and husbands to join an armed group to make money.

For some people, fighting seemed like the only option, even if they initially dropped out of the rebellion because they did not want to fight. According to one worker for a nongovernmental organization in a refugee camp on the border with Syria, work was hard to find: “People would come here [Turkey] and try to find a job for several months. If they did not find anything, they’d go back to fighting since they needed to provide for their families. Even if it doesn’t pay much, as a fighter, they could easily cross checkpoints and get involved in smuggling.”

Like employees of a business who are only there for the paycheck, these kinds of fighters, especially in any important position, were a serious

problem for armed groups. Not only were they expensive—consuming the group’s resources—they decreased the group’s cohesion and effectiveness. These were fighters with no loyalty (to the group or cause) who hampered teamwork and endangered other group members, among other things. One fighter said¹ they had to get rid of people who were “corrupt and used drugs.” For another group,² the problems were “abusing civilians and fighting with other group members.” A fighter with Dhe Qar said they had to expel a lot of fighters for “abusing civilians and stealing.” In some cases, looting became so bad that fighters would take wire out of the building walls, burn off the plastic casing, and sell the copper.

By attracting these kinds of fighters, a group’s abundance of material resources could, counterintuitively, reduce the quality of the group’s human capital. Thus, popular and well-funded armed groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham had to develop sophisticated human resource policies that ensured only loyal and highly motivated fighters entered and remained in their ranks, at least in the important positions.

In addition to the survey with three hundred fighters in Syria (including members of Islamist groups) and a focus group, this chapter is based on interviews with different group leaders and members conducted in Turkey and in Syria. Over the course of five years, extensive interviews with more than forty local members of Islamist groups were conducted. Also, because of the relationships we developed with many of them, many granted us several interviews during that time to monitor changes in their group’s human resource policies.

Recruitment

For many armed groups, especially at the beginning of the conflict, prospective fighters were, at best, minimally screened. A member of Abu Ammarah in Aleppo said, “We didn’t screen people—a fighter only had to have pro-revolutionary sentiments and be able to hold a Kalashnikov [AK47].” According to one fighter, to join Bait Al-Maqdes, a person only “had to be disciplined and believe in the FSA [Free Syrian Army].” For Al-Qadeseyyah,

¹ Anonymous, Deir Ezzor countryside, 122 people.

² Anonymous, Deir Ezzor City, 55 people.

“A potential member had to participate in the peaceful protests, be of good behavior, and be ready to sacrifice himself for the country.”

But for groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, as well as other Islamist groups that were well regarded by fighters (and as a result had an oversupply of prospective fighters), more advanced screening was needed. At first, a fighter joining these groups only had to prove he was not a spy for the regime, which could generally be verified by his neighbors. But later in the war, when everyone was clamoring for membership (and its benefits), the screening system developed quickly, ensuring higher-quality members and making membership more competitive.

In the first step in the recruitment process, Islamist groups looked at an individual’s fighting history. It was Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham’s official policy to accept only good Muslims, which arguably was no crucial military skill. On the other hand, when asked, Jabhat al-Nusra members were not able to explain what a good Muslim was or how to recognize one. It seemed that if a prospective member had been active in the opposition before the war (under the Assad dictatorship), participated in demonstrations (unafraid of the high probability of imprisonment), and joined the war early on (paying for a weapon and ammunition with his own money), he qualified as a good Muslim.

Nevertheless, prospective applicants were not required to be devoutly religious. For example, although it is well known in Islam that taking part in jihad requires parental permission,³ only one-fifth of surveyed Islamist group members did so. The others either did not know about the requirement or did not take it seriously. It was also not a requirement for Islamic group membership, which seems an odd omission for groups that purport to wage religious jihad. In fact, the majority of Islamist group members admit that they were not very religious when they joined and became more religious after joining the group.⁴

³ On the authority of Abi Saeed al Khudri (*radi allahu anhu*), who said, “A man made Hijra to the Prophet (*salalla alahi wasalam*), so the Prophet said; ‘Have you got anybody in Yemen?’ So the man said, ‘My two parents.’ So he (*salalla alahi wasalam*) said, ‘Did you seek their permission?’ So the man said, ‘No.’ So the Prophet said, ‘Go back to them both and seek permission from them, and if they give permission, then do jihad, and if not, be good to them.” Ahmad Vol 3 pg 76; Abu Dawood, Hadith No 2530 and Ibn Hibban authenticated it Vol 1 pg 325 Hadith No 423.

⁴ In the survey, 73.4 percent of members of Islamist groups said that they had become more religious while with the group (vs. 37.7 percent of members of moderate groups), 24.4 percent said that the level of their religiosity had not changed since joining the group (vs. 54.1 percent of members of moderate groups) and 2.0 percent said that they actually became less religious (vs. 8.2 percent of members of moderate groups).

Foreign fighters who were attracted to Syria by the idea of a jihad and encountered local Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham members were shocked by what they considered an absence of any interest in Islam. Some interviewed foreign fighters, including one who himself was in al-Nusra briefly, did not even consider local fighters with these groups to be Muslims.

Much like when applying for a job in the civilian world, a prospective fighter for Jabhat al-Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham also had to have recommendations. To join the group, a fighter needed *tezkiyya*, the personal recommendations of two commanders who would vouch for his skills, religious commitment, and attitude. In Jabhat al-Nusra, when leaders met several times a month to discuss military strategies and other organizational issues, they also discussed the admittance of new members based on these recommendations. If, after reviewing the recommendations, the group's leaders were still unsure of the moral character and trustworthiness of the applicant, they might monitor his everyday activities and habits for several days by literally following him around in his civilian life.

Some fighters had to "apply" several times to gain acceptance. In 2013, one prospective fighter who had a history of drug addiction (he had even served time in prison for drug-related charges) decided to join Jabhat al-Nusra. His application was rejected despite two recommendations from Jabhat al-Nusra members. He then spent the following two months meeting other group members and leaders and securing their recommendations for reapplication. Finally, after convincing seven people to vote for him and then persuading the leaders that his drug problem was no longer an issue, he was welcomed into the group.

Moreover, in the case of Jabhat al-Nusra, its status as an internationally recognized terrorist group unintentionally imposed an additional screening mechanism. Because affiliation with Jabhat al-Nusra could lead to arrests in other countries,⁵ people not entirely committed to fighting with the group until the end of the war (or death) were less likely to join. When Jabhat al-Nusra members were asked, "Let's assume someone is thinking very seriously about switching to Jabhat al-Nusra. What could be holding him back?" They acknowledged the biggest concern for prospective fighters was being blacklisted and unable to leave Syria. The group's terrorist status worked as another screening mechanism.

⁵ Jabhat al-Nusra was designated as a terrorist organization by Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Turkey.

Code of Conduct

For the Name of Allah. Thanks to Allah, Lord of the Universe. Peace and Blessing to his Messenger, Emir of all Mujahideen, Muhammad. There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.

Peace be upon you, so may the mercy of the Allah and his blessings, mujaheed brothers.

Salam [peace] to you, my brother.

My letter is a *nasiha* [advice] and an explanation. I got your message as an *amania* [responsibility in front of God] from our brothers . . . And I, inshaAllah, want to clarify this information and do a *nasiha* because it is our duty to help each other and correct each other. We, brothers mujaheeds are united and we have one goal.

This is a beginning of the message that basically could be shortened to “Dear all, In regard to your last message . . .” without any loss of meaningful information. Although this message published on an obscure Islamist telegram channel was followed by a very interesting opinion about the situation in Syria, written by a visibly educated fighter, it was still heavily mixed with largely unnecessary words with religious connotation and quotes from the Quran and Hadith. At the same time, if all of those additional words and expressions were deleted, the message itself could have been considered “moderate” and could have been published as an op-ed piece in a mainstream Western media outlet. Why did the author take such a long road writing in that style? The main text could have been much shorter and much easier to write (and read), especially assuming he was typing this message on a cellphone from a frontline in Syria without good electricity or network coverage.

In addition, to make this letter look more credible, it was accompanied by a picture of a young fighter sitting in traditional-style Islamic dress, with a gun on his right side and a pillow with a *shahada* (“There is no god but Allah”) written on it on his left side. What is the point of adding all these symbols and signals? The whole letter looked like it was written in a coded language, understandable only to a relatively small group of people.

Although a vigorous screening process helps recruit the best candidates initially, it does not do much about weeding out those who join a group in good faith but become disappointed with it (or the war in general) as time goes by. Not only do malcontents bring down morale and consume

the group's scarce resources, they are the most likely to be recruited as spies. They may have passed the screening and been dedicated members with a good track record, and have the trust of the leadership and other members. But if they are no longer dedicated to the nonmaterial goals, they could easily be lured by immediate monetary benefits offered by the enemy.

To ensure that armed groups have only the most trustworthy, dedicated, and loyal fighters at all times, Islamist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham kept their members in line with a strict set of rules that did not directly impact fighting.⁶ Similar to a code of conduct (or ethics) for a business, these rules governed the daily actions of the fighters. Adding this cost to membership gave the group a way to, if not prove a member's dedication, impose easy-to-monitor prohibitions.

It also gave fighters a way to signal their level of dedication by their level of compliance. And though they may have seemed arbitrary to fighters, these codes, again, were rationalized by the group's interpretation of Islam and Islamist mores. Those codes also helped distinguish in-groups from out-groups (i.e., a civil war within an ethnic or linguistic group, and where group allegiances even tend to change in time) in an environment where it is not intuitively clear.

Although there are different ideologies that could be successfully used by a group for this purpose, the most successful ones in wartime are based on religion because the closer fighters are to death, the more likely they are to turn to religion. According to one of al-Qaeda's major books, *Management of Savagery*:

Dragging the masses into the battle requires more actions which will inflame opposition and which will make the people enter into the battle, willing or unwilling, such that each individual will go to the side which he supports. We must make this battle very violent, such that death is a heartbeat away, so that the two groups will realize that entering this battle will frequently lead to death. That will be a powerful motive for the individual to choose to fight in the ranks of the people of truth in order to die well, which is better than dying for falsehood and losing both this world and the next.

⁶ Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Why Strict Churches Are Strong," *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1180–1211. Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

So the strategy of an armed group is simply to modify a natural desire of fighters to be closer to religion, to make it more into visible symbolism, to highlight in-group versus out-group distinctions, and to serve as a screening mechanism.

In Syria, the most visible signal of a fighter's dedication to the group's ideology was the dress code. All fighters were required to wear a *shalwar kameez*, a Central Asian outfit consisting of a long tunic and baggy pants. Although there are religious regulations for male dress, this particular type of clothing is not required by Islam. This pajama-like male outfit is traditional to Central Asia (in particular in Pashtun areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan) but was rare in Syria before the war. Only occasionally would men in rural areas, maybe working in gardens, wear something similar, but it was still not the same. Syrians call it either the "Afghani outfit" or "sharia outfit"; in either case, it was not a compliment. Even the word "Afghani" could possibly be considered an insult, since even Jabhat al-Nusra members thought poorly of Afghanis.

Although other requirements—like praying five times a day and abstaining from alcohol—could easily be justified by Islam, Jabhat al-Nusra also prohibited smoking. In general, smoking is not prohibited in Islam, and interviewed Jabhat al-Nusra members were unable to explain the reason smoking was prohibited, as the chance of dying on the battlefield was much higher than dying from smoking-related illnesses. And because smoking is very popular in Middle Eastern countries, refraining clearly indicated a person's dedication to the group, but not necessarily Islam.

Local group members themselves understood that following the group's code was not related to the religion. In an interview, one former fighter of Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Allaa, explained how he came to that conclusion: "At first I used to think that those rules were actually from Islam, but after I read more [about Islam] and understood it, I don't think it is related to religion. Our religion is easygoing. I think those restrictions exist because of religious misunderstanding and the will of the military groups to enforce laws."

He continued:

Sometimes I felt our leadership was out of touch, and they needed to understand our local issues better. Syria had the most smokers in the whole Arab world. My whole family smoked, even my mom. And that restriction was the hardest thing to deal with in my group. They just handed down

restrictions from the sharia leadership, and we had to obey. I didn't feel okay with it, and actually it was one of the reasons I decided to leave.

Three different types of punishments for violations further demonstrated the low importance of the Islamist component to those groups. For a violation of religious prohibitions, such as smoking or missing a prayer, a fighter was given the lightest penalty, written warning and a lecture from a group leader. The second punishment, lashing, despite being considered by Islamist groups as one of the most Islamic types of punishment, was almost never used within the group.⁷ Serious violations were usually those related to combat performance, and were punished with immediate expulsion. The most common reason for that, according to Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham fighters, was not following orders in battle. Such difference in levels of punishment (minor for religious misconduct and major for military) was a key indicator of the group's priorities.

There were other al-Nusra fighters who didn't agree *or* leave the group. Though they upheld the code in public, many fighters proudly explained how they disobeyed privately. According to Abu Allaa, local fighters went to great lengths to break the rules, especially the smoking ban. Fighters would send their relatives to buy cigarettes for them at the local market, and when the sharia court prohibited selling cigarettes, fighters went to other towns and then smuggled them back into territory controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra. They would smoke a water pipe at friends' houses and cigarettes in bathrooms on the frontlines; to hide the smell, they would eat a lemon or burn dirt. "Sometimes when leadership visited I was afraid, unless we were on the frontlines," Abu Allaa said. "I was not afraid of them there because I could die there any minute anyway."

Abu Allaa said there were also members of the group who drank alcohol, but he was not one of them: "In some areas, people smuggled alcohol, and sometimes there were private parties between the fighting. I was invited by one of my friends for some *Arak* [local alcoholic beverage], but I didn't go. Drinking is much harder to hide than smoking." In addition to drinking, some members in Jabhat al-Nusra also smoked hashish and marijuana.

⁷ Most often, it is applied to civilians for public image purposes by recording and widely distributing it on the internet. The most common reason for such punishment is sex outside of marriage (for women).

Other rules often violated were related to the dress code. Jabhat al-Nusra encouraged their members to have long hair, calling other types of haircuts “crusaders.” But for fighters, long hair was feminine, inconvenient, and difficult to keep clean on the frontline.⁸ “I also didn’t wear Afghani clothes because I was more into a formal military uniform,” one fighter told me. How did he get away with it? “I told my leaders I couldn’t find the *shalwar kameez* in my size. Luckily I had a big belly,” joked Abu Allaa, an above-average-sized person.

And such behavior of fighters was confirmed from the other side, from the side of leadership who were in charge of enforcing those rules. An interviewed Uzbek leader of a small group, complained to me how he had problems making his fighters pray. “During the time of prayer I would wake them up and ask why they were not praying,” he explained. “They would say that because they are on Jihad they are excused from praying all necessary prayers.” “C’mon, those guys were not on Jihad, they were not even on the frontline, but were sleeping on the base, so how bad was their excuse ?” angrily commented ex-Amir from Uzbekistan.

To further confirm that Jabhat al-Nusra’s code of conduct was not truly religious in purpose, it is important to look at what was *not* required by the group. First, primary religious classes did not start until after boot camp, which consisted only of military training. Fighters were expected to study religion during their free (non-combat) time on the base. One interviewed foreign fighter who had gone through a Jabhat al-Nusra training camp complained that, upon graduating, he did not know what Tawheed⁹ was and had to ask around. Jabhat al-Nusra did not require its fighters to memorize the Quran either, although the Prophet said: “The best among you is a person who learns the Holy Quran and teaches it.”

Although Jabhat al-Nusra fighters did attend Quran recitation classes, no one tested their mastery of the Quran, though this could have been easily checked with a simple exam. Since memorizing the Quran is very difficult and time-consuming compared to other religious requirements, it is not in the best interests of the group to enforce this study strictly. Jabhat

⁸ Before the war, having long hair for a man was considered feminine and indicative of homosexuality. People who had it were called *tant*, bullied, and often verbally attacked. Even four years into the war, these two notions were competing in the heads of Syrian fighters.

⁹ The foundational concept of monotheism in Islam.

Table 4.1 Survey of Fighters: Familiarity with Religious Leaders

Cleric	Percent recognition
Abu Mus'ab As-Suri	84
Abu Qatada al-Filistini	59
Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi	49
Abu Maria al-Qahtani (al-Nusra)	47
Sulayman al-Alwan	41
Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir (al-Nusra)	35
Sami al-Oraidi (al-Nusra)	35

al-Nusra did not check its fighters for religious knowledge or even how they interpreted what they did know.

During the survey, participants were examined on how familiar they were with several prominent clerics, both those renowned globally and within Jabhat al-Nusra circles (Table 4.1). Specifically, they were asked, "Have you heard or read the Islamic teachings of any of the following?" with a list of seven clerics. Three of the clerics were the current official scholars of al-Nusra (Abu Maria al-Qahtani, Sami al-Oraidi, and Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir) while others were relatively prominent global jihadi scholars (Abu Mus'ab As-Suri, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al-Filistini, and Sulayman al-Alwan).¹⁰ Although only one in fifty reported not recognizing any of the names, less than half of the respondents were familiar with all of them. Outlier Abu Mus'ab As-Suri's popularity may be because he is Syrian.

It was surprising not only that so few fighters in general recognized the names of prominent jihadi clerics, but also that they were more familiar with global clerics than prominent clerics within Jabhat al-Nusra. This serves as further evidence of al-Nusra's low interest in the religious studies of its members. Some of the more religious recruits remember being shocked by how little time there was to study religion and how little the group cared about it. One interviewed foreign fighter who was in Jabhat al-Nusra before switching to Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) complained, "Jabhat al-Nusra was absolutely not interested in us learning about Islam. Their only goal was to fight."

¹⁰ An expert on religious jihad, Prof. Richard Nielsen (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), contributed to constructing this list.

It is important to note that for some, the ideological requirements were not mandatory—mainly people who had unique skills and were in short supply. Crucially important during those times were doctors and surgeons in particular. According to an interviewed surgeon from Dair Ezzor who worked under FSA and then under al-Nusra and ISIS,

There was only a small number of doctors left in town, but we were truly privileged. There were no restrictions or laws that applied to us. I was allowed to have internet and was smoking in my apartment. ISIS knew about that, but none could tell me anything. For example, when cigarette smugglers were arrested and they mentioned my name, or any other doctor or pharmacist, the group did not punish us.

Although this code of conduct has proven to be somewhat reliable as a way both to filter out undesirables and to measure devotion, it has caused some interesting problems. First, as some fighters looking for promotion mastered the complicated restrictions, it raised the bar for the others who did not want to be seen as less dedicated. Thus it became the new norm and was no longer an effective indicator of dedication.

Not only did that change the norm inside of the group, but some of the restrictions become popular and entered into mass culture. Before the war, no one in Syria wore the “Afghani outfit,” but when Islamist group members started wearing it *en masse*, it became more popular. As time went on, more and more civilians—especially children who wanted to emulate fighters they respected—were wearing *shalwar kameez*, as well as overusing expressions with religious connotations.

The same was true for hairstyles. Since the beginning of the war, the signature jihadi facial hairstyle (beard with no mustache) became common even on frontlines in the Ukraine among non-Muslim fighters who, in their free time, watched videos of the fighting in the Middle East. According to them, it looked masculine and powerful. Long hair on boys also became more acceptable in the Syrian culture, and a problem in refugee camps. Children who wanted to look like respected fighters refused to cut their hair, and this, because of the lack of water, led to more frequent lice epidemics.

As the al-Nusra code became the norm, the group had to up the ante. They had to continually invent new decorative elements, a job that became harder and harder with time. That is another reason Jabhat al-Nusra prohibited smoking. Compared to the other restrictions, which lose their

meaning as they become popular, not smoking is a personal investment in self-control; as a result, it is one of the most telling. And this is in the midst of societal changes. Although smoking was once widely acceptable in the society, now it is not surprising to hear a mother mention smoking as one of the main disadvantages of a future son-in-law, regardless of any connection to Jabhat al-Nusra.

Second, groups that claimed to be Islamist had to frame everything they did through the rhetoric of the religion. Even though members of Islamist groups openly admitted that their main goal was defeating Assad and supporting democracy at the beginning of the war, it would be considered strange for an Islamist group to claim they were fighting for those values, so they later framed the war as religious and branded the enemy, Assad, as *kafir* (nonbeliever). According to local activists on the ground, they have not heard fighters using this word in relation to Assad before 2013, when Islamist groups started increasing in power. Claiming Assad was *kafir* solved the problem of having a religious goal that satisfied group members without actually changing it. On the other hand, with time (as usually happens with new terms, it got its own life), people started understanding and using the word *kafir* differently, which led to major problems (more about them in Chapters 10 and 11).

A similar situation was including females into the armed groups. Even when there was a strategic need on the battlefield and there were females willing to step in, groups were constrained by their own rhetoric and had to go a great length to make them included.¹¹

Despite complications and restrictions that seemed unproductive, these policies did help groups filter out less-motivated individuals while, at the same time, increasing the dedication of those who joined and remained.

Turnover

Regardless of the amount of people who want to be hired, any business can only afford a certain amount of employees. For groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, that means making it easy for members to leave

¹¹ This problem was the most visible in ISIS when it was losing territory and manpower and had to mobilize everyone it had. To do so, leaders had to overrule their previous ruling banning female fighters.

when their labor supply exceeds demand. Groups want only the most dedicated members who can do the job well. If, after a fighter joins one of these groups, he realizes he cannot keep up with the group, he is free to either quit fighting altogether or switch to another group. Taking into account a group's budget constraints, losing one discontented member allows the group to afford a new, more dedicated fighter who will contribute to the group's success.

A fighter might leave Jabhat al-Nusra in any one of three ways. Those who lost interest in the goal of the war were welcome to return to civilian life. Jabhat al-Nusra provided grounds for this with the following quote from the Hadith:

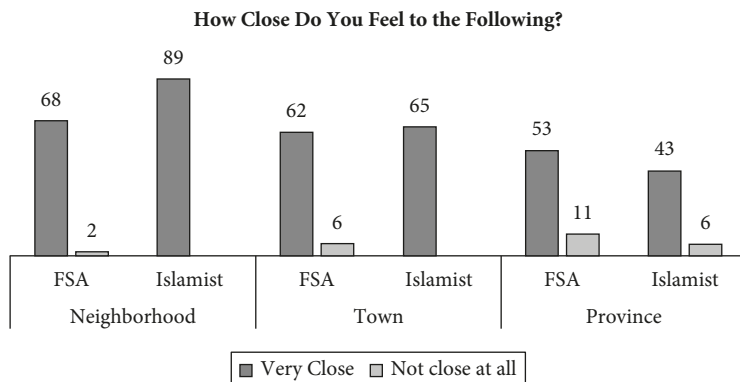
Abd Allah b. "Umar related that a man came to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and asked his permission to join in the military effort. The Prophet (peace be upon him) asked him: 'Are your parents alive?' The man replied: 'Yes.' The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'By serving them you perform jihad.' [*Sahih al-Bukhârî, Sunan al-Nasâ'î, Sunan, Abî Dâwûd and Sunan al-Tirmidhî*].

Other scenarios, as of 2015, might have been a fighter who still had the desire to fight for the goal of the war but no longer wanted to adhere to Jabhat al-Nusra's standards, in which case he could easily switch to another group (i.e., Ahrar al-Sham). A fighter might have also been "fired" (as in expulsion) from the group for military insubordination.

Those who did leave the group were no longer subject to its code of conduct. According to Abu Allaa, who quit fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra in 2015, "At first, smoking in public and wearing civilian clothes felt strange, but you get used to that very fast."

Policy Results

On the whole, human resource policies adopted by groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham seemed to work well in several dimensions. Members of Islamist armed groups, on average, were more determined to fight than FSA fighters. For example, while only 65 percent of surveyed FSA fighters said that the only acceptable resolution of the conflict would be decisive military victory over the Assad regime, all members of Islamist



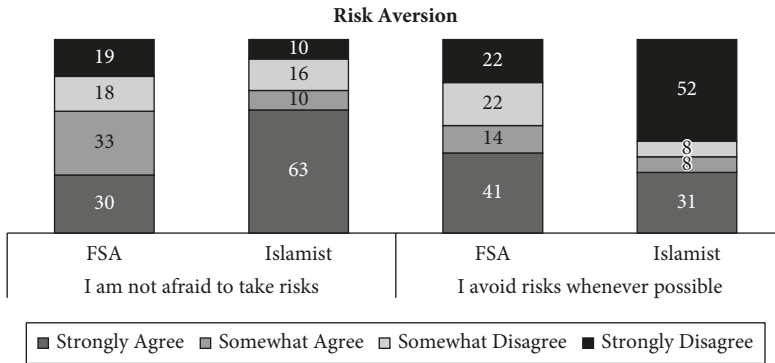
Graph 4.1. Survey of fighters: closeness to civilians.

groups agreed with this statement. In addition, while 65 percent of surveyed members of Islamist groups strongly disagreed that Syria could be divided, only 37 percent of FSA fighters favored this opinion.

In general, members of Islamist groups felt closer to civilians than members of the moderate FSA, some of whom did not feel close to civilians at all (Graph 4.1).

Also, members of Islamist groups were more likely to take risks. Sixty-three percent of surveyed members of Islamist groups were not afraid to take risks, while only 30 percent of FSA members shared this opinion (Graph 4.2). Conversely, 56 percent of FSA members tried to avoid risks whenever possible, compared to 39 percent of members of Islamist groups (52 percent of whom also strongly disagreed with this statement). A foreign ISIS fighter who had fought in a battle against the FSA explained, “We were able to get their tanks and armored personnel carriers because they were trying to minimize the danger they exposed themselves to and fought only from a distance. So when we advanced on them, they left their equipment behind.”

Islamist groups were also more successful in ensuring cohesion among their group. When asked how close they felt to other members of their group, all members of Islamist groups said they felt very close to each other. Members of the FSA, on the other hand, were polarized in their answers: 63 percent said that they felt very close to their comrades, 29 percent felt somewhat close, 7 percent not very close, and an additional 2 percent felt not close at all.



Graph 4.2. Survey of fighters: risk aversion.

Conclusion

While Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham enjoyed a rapid increase of prospective applicants along with good fighters, they were also in danger of attracting many less-dedicated members who sought the benefits but offered no loyalty to the group or interest in the goal. These kinds of employees can hurt a civilian company, but in the civil war industry, they could represent its demise. Not only were freeloaders poor fighters, but they might also destroy cohesion inside the unit, become defectors, or make the whole unit less effective.

To filter them out, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham had incentive not only to implement screening measures, but to impose a strict code of conduct. Although some personal sacrifice was required, it increased the aggregate utility of group members. It also made people joining the group for reasons other than serving the goal think twice, and made other groups or even alternative occupations look more appealing to them. With these additional requirements imposed, only the most dedicated fighters joined and stayed.

Without the role of ideology, explaining and rationalizing such a code of conduct could be seen not just as illogical but as ridiculous to fighters and civilians. Therefore ideology, and in the case of Syria religion, came in handy. Using this strategy, Islamist groups attracted the best and most dedicated fighters and also retained them.

Such human resource policies are productive only when the group is highly popular among prospective fighters and the supply of interested fighters is larger than the demand. In that case, a group can afford to be strict, allow free exit, and expel those who fail to uphold standards. Groups that were less popular or needed to expand could not afford to use such policies and instead might have accepted everyone who applied and even imposed a draft.

5

Help from Abroad

There was probably only one country that did not have foreign fighters in Syria, and that was the Vatican.

Joke from an Islamist Russian-language Telegram channel

In previous chapters, I explored how local people, when faced with war bearing down on them, were forced to decide whether to stay, fight, or leave the conflict zone and how armed groups managed them. But the war also brought other fighters, an unprecedented influx of foreigners whose reasons for fighting must be considered separately. So, in this chapter, I will look at foreigners whose decision-making calculus on whether to fight or not was different from that of locals. If foreigners decided to take up arms, what role did they play, and to what extent did they participate? While some foreigners made the decision to take the risk and go to the frontline, others did not participate in combat roles. Instead, like local civilians (Chapter 2), they actively helped armed groups, albeit from outside of Syria. Compared to their local brothers-in-arms, foreign fighters in Syria were limited in their choice of groups to fight for. The majority of them fought for either Jabhat al-Nusra (and its affiliates) or Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). Their movement between groups was also much more restricted. Although at the outbreak of the war there was some inchoate sense that the two groups were fighting for the same goal, their enmity for each other eventually spilled over into open hostility.

To trace the whole circle of a foreign fighter's participation in the labor market, I will first look at foreigners who came to Syria to take up weapons and at people who preferred to support their group of choice by other means. Next, I will discuss how foreign fighters ended up in the groups they did. And finally, I will discuss foreigners who later quit and left. In the following chapters, I will look at how it affected armed groups' management of those group members.

Collecting the data for this chapter was particularly challenging, especially getting access to former fighters in hiding. Because data were limited to the consequent selection bias of those who not only agreed to talk to a researcher but also survived to do so, I relied on interviewed fighters to also tell me about other fighters in their groups (both alive and dead). While quitting was acceptable in Jabhat al-Nusra and small ethnic-based groups,¹ in ISIS even discussing the desire to quit or escape was very dangerous, so most ISIS foreign fighters had only limited knowledge of other fighters' opinions on this issue, even inside their own unit.² As a result, when taking about ISIS, I only had the information from people who managed to escape to rely on, which could lead to a certain selection bias.

This chapter is based on semistructured interviews with current and former foreign fighters, their family members, and supporters of ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and smaller semi-independent ethnic-based groups. Interviews were conducted in person (and through different messaging applications) inside of Syria, Iraq, and Turkey, as well as in person in Ukraine, Russia, and Central Asia. Because many of the interviewed foreign fighters know each other and at some point in time were in same *units*, I was often able to cross-verify their information. In sum, more than twenty foreign fighters were interviewed. In some cases, interviews were brief (one to two hours) because either the individuals did not trust me enough or I did not feel safe conducting the interview. In other cases, interviews took fifteen to twenty hours over the span of several days. In many cases, when there was mutual trust, I corresponded with foreign fighters by phone and text message for over three years, the length of time I've worked on this book.

In addition, group sympathizers involved in helping foreign fighters move to Syria were interviewed in Turkey, as were anti-ISIS activists involved with later getting foreign fighters out. Beyond the challenges of getting access to members of groups on the terrorist list, one interview was particularly challenging: it was conducted with a member of Amni, ISIS's internal security, and the most secret and dangerous part of their organization.

¹ Although those groups are participating in military operations with other, larger groups, they have a separate chain of command.

² Foreigners were often recruited as informants for the ISIS Amni and would provoke discussions in the groups about escaping and then record it. Although one of the former ISIS foreign fighters I interviewed spent four months in an Amni prison with other people who tried to escape, even in the prison cell this issue was not discussed out of fear of audio recording.

Foreign Supporters

Similar to Syrian refugees and members of the diaspora who were supporting the goals of the war from abroad, there was a wide network of foreign civilian supporters outside of the conflict zone. They were interested in the goal of the conflict but decided to stay home and “fight” by other means.

Foreign fighters called them “fans,” comparing them to people who love soccer and have strong feelings toward their team but have never played soccer themselves. Those people called themselves “representatives” and claimed that, when the time was right, they would go to Syria and Iraq and fight too. But former ISIS foreign fighters who had spent years fighting in Iraq and Syria disagreed and saw these supporters as people who were too afraid to go to Syria themselves. “They are simply afraid to fight and die,” one former fighter had explained. The scope of their involvement in their organization of choice greatly differed. It might have been as simple as following online news that praised their group of choice or as significant as actively helping armed groups and foreign fighters on their way to and in the conflict zone.

First of all, the most well-known supporters were the most “vocal” ones: those distributing group propaganda online. Active fighters called them “armchair *mujahideen* who could only *shaheed* [die] by falling from a couch,” because such involvement was the least dangerous and required the least amount of time. Others served in more appreciated ways by helping the groups with funding. The amount of financial support ranged from cellphone credit to substantial amounts of money. Wealthy individuals who could not leave their businesses helped with what they could do best—earn money. ISIS had even encouraged people with good salaries to keep working and send money instead of quitting their civilian jobs or illegal activities at home and coming to the frontline. Financial supporters also helped with purchasing and shipping necessary equipment not available in the conflict zone (such as quadcopters).

In 2013, in a propaganda video, members of the group Jaish Muhajireen wa Ansar made a special address to “brothers who left to America and Europe,” emphasizing that it could be even more honorable than physically being on the battlefield.

This task of funding was considered so crucial for armed groups that in his book *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, Abu Mus’ab As-Suri—one of

the main al-Qaeda writers and advisers to Islamist groups—wrote, “Money is the pillar and foundation of jihad and we understand this from bitter realities. We also realize why the mentioning of jihad with one’s life is parallel with the mentioning of jihad with one’s wealth. In a lot of Quranic verses, jihad with one’s wealth comes first.”

Supporters who could not contribute money contributed time. One way was by facilitating money transfers. By becoming a middleman in the transaction, a supporter made it easier for wealthy people to send money without being affiliated with people or groups considered to be terrorists. One interviewed fighter explained the method: “To get money from abroad, you needed to contact an ISIS smuggler [supporter] in Turkey. Your friends would send money to his account outside of Syria, then he would move it to Syria with prospective fighters waiting to cross the border.”

One of the other main supporter occupations was helping prospective fighters get to the conflict zone. In one case, an ISIS foreign fighter, originally from Dagestan, called his brother, a successful businessman in Moscow. Although his brother had never even considered going to ISIS, the fighter asked him to help pay for two airplane tickets from Moscow to Turkey—one for an elderly woman from the Caucasus region moving to be near her children in Syria, and one for a prospective fighter from Tajikistan. According to court documents, without any questions, the brother bought them tickets from his personal bank account, and it was his only engagement with ISIS.

Other supporters helped with documents and visas, bus tickets inside Turkey, organizing safe houses, and smuggling people across the border. According to the father of a foreign fighter, who had gone to Syria several times, “When I came to Turkey there were people who met me and helped me get to Hatay [Turkish town near Syria border]. I stayed in someone’s house until that night when a taxi came and drove me across the border. It was the same when my wife came. There were people facilitating every step of our trip.” The same was true the other way around: wounded fighters who would be transferred to Turkey for treatment would be also housed under the care and supervision of group supporters there.

Here it is also important to note that some of those representatives treated their support purely as business. For example, ISIS would send money to supporters in Turkey to buy uniforms for new fighters, and those representatives would keep that money and ask a prospective fighter to buy everything himself or sell him everything he needed for twice the price. The

same with transportation; supporters would ask a prospective fighter to pay them for a ride into Syria despite being already paid by the group. In addition, some would simply steal money given to them to buy equipment for the group. And they did this not only with cheap equipment, but also with expensive equipment such as night vision or drones.

Despite those problems, this sort of non-combat-related support is considered very valuable by the group. According to a former ISIS foreign fighter, “There was a person in Istanbul who helped by meeting prospective foreign fighters. He really wanted to move to Syria, but ISIS kept telling him that he was more needed to keep doing what he was doing. Only after he insisted really hard they allowed him to cross to Syria.”

Although not immediately obvious, interviewed foreign fighters also pointed to the moral support that such civilians provided to future fighters. Through social media and phone calls, they supported and encouraged them all the way to the frontline and, in some cases, helped their families who were left behind in their home countries. For example, a popular Telegram channel among foreign fighters was the Russian-language, pro-al-Nusra “Voice of Sham,” which would share handwritten letters of support for *mujahideen* from former Soviet countries, written in their languages such as Avar (in Dagestan), Uzbek, and Tajik.

Some civilian supporters also helped groups with information. Because it was logistically difficult for people inside of Syria to collect foreign intelligence, supporters sometimes screened prospective fighters to make sure they did not work for law enforcement. Many had a wide range of contacts abroad, did not attract attention, and could even visit a prospective fighter in person, an irreplaceable service to the groups.

Another goal of some supporters was to protect ISIS’s image in the global Islamic community. Similar to Syrian members of the diaspora and refugee community who sometimes used their status to increase their political goals, some people were protecting ISIS’s brand not only because they truly believed in the caliphate, but because they also had material interests. Any information about problems inside of ISIS might have discouraged donors from sending money, which would have made the supporters’ jobs less relevant and would have reduced their personal income. So they defended ISIS’s international image using different methods, from representing the group in debates on internet radio to assassinating people who spoke out against the group, including former fighters disillusioned with the Islamic State.

In the debate about the benefit of the caliphate over democracy, ISIS supporters often cited first Caliph Abu Bakr As-Siddeeq, who said, “If I do well, then help me; and if I act wrongly, then correct me,” affirming the rights of citizens to hold their leaders accountable for their actions. However, this did not stop supporters from targeting the former fighters who spoke openly about the problems inside of ISIS. In one known case in Ukraine in 2016, two ISIS supporters scheduled a meeting with a former ISIS fighter, pretending to be undecided about joining ISIS. To discourage them, the former fighter agreed to meet late one evening in a café on the outskirts of a remote industrial town. While he was explaining the real state of affairs in the caliphate, more supporters joined the table and jumped on him with a knife. Their lack of fighting experience left two supporters stabbed instead, after which the former fighter escaped in the chaos. “They were acting on the order of the emir of the town [in Syria],” commented the former fighter. Those same supporters tried to meet with another former fighter hiding in the same country, but he refused. According to him, “If there is an order to kill me, ISIS supporters would not hesitate for a second.”

In another case in the same country, individuals pretending to be ISIS supporters killed the former imam of a local mosque after robbing him. According to someone who knew both the imam and the killers, “He was a rich guy while those so-called ISIS supporters did not even know the difference between al-Nusra and ISIS.”

Because ISIS supporters were not always able to stop former fighters from talking, they also worked to discredit them. One Russian song written by ISIS supporters abroad had the following lyrics:

We were lied to by ex-fighters who returned and said
there is no jihad and we should not go there
Their words were like arrows shot into our bodies
but we did not fall down.

Like local civilians who helped the group, foreign civilians also played an important role. But unlike local civilians, whose proximity to the armed groups gave them a clear picture of the conflict, foreign supporters were more likely to see the situation through rose-colored glasses. They were like the civilian diaspora of a recognized country—much more patriotic because they did not experience problems that those inside did. According to one former ISIS foreign fighter, “They have never been to Syria but think

they could go anytime and see everything for themselves. They don't even realize that if they entered ISIS territory, they would never be permitted to leave."

Joining to Fight

It is hard to imagine someone would leave the comfort and peace at home to take part in a war abroad, but many people did. These individuals hailed from many countries and walks of life, and joined for reasons ranging from ideological to simple and even banal. And at the very beginning of the Syrian conflict, when no major armed groups had formed yet and there were no clear divisions between the ones that existed, those who went fought with many small units consisting of foreign fighters with their own independent leadership and funding. Those individuals who strongly believed in the nonmaterial goal of helping the Syrians fight a dictator (or the abstract idea of jihad) came ready to sacrifice themselves. According to the father of one Dagestani foreign fighter who, although abstaining from the fight himself, went to Syria several times, "When I came to my son's base, I saw all those young people with the glint in their eyes. They wanted to fight and were ready to die for a cause."

One foreign fighter from Central Asia had gone to Syria at the age of sixteen. Before then, he had lived in Moscow and had a very normal life until the events in Syria caught his attention. He started reading more about the situation and became very concerned with the actions of the regime and the plight of the Syrians. "I was a regular person, just working and studying," he explained. "And I was so nonreligious at that time, I did not even pray." In 2013, after viewing disturbing videos about the victims of Assad's chemical attacks, he decided to go to Syria and join the fight. He truly believed he could help the Syrian civilians. "It would be an honor to fight against such a dictator," he explained. He left a note for his parents—"I found my way, please do not look for me"—and went.

Abu Mariam, a French foreign fighter with a degree in construction engineering who converted to Islam, went to Syria from Toulouse to fight for the religion. Although in the interview he acknowledged that he drank alcohol, was surrounded by drugs, and had been sexually active from an early age, for him the Syrian conflict was not a war; it was a test of his faith and devotion to Islam with jihad as the ultimate, purifying expression of faith,

culminating in martyrdom and heavenly rewards. “I am but a contribution to the conquest of Islam,” he said, “and I also look forward to reaching paradise via jihad for the cause of Allah.”

A twenty-eight-year-old fighter from Saudi Arabia, Khalid (name changed) led a luxurious life back home but was more comfortable in Syria. He claimed he lost nearly \$150,000 in investments in the U.S. stock market as a result of the 2008 economic recession. He was also a big fan of the soccer team Real Madrid in Spain and the Al Nasr Team in Saudi Arabia. As he explained, “I was engaged, but I broke off my marriage for the sake of jihad. . . . And now, psychologically speaking, life is better because I am abiding by our Messenger’s recommendations (may prayer and peace be upon Him) and fighting for the cause of Allah.”

Among fighters who did not have any close relations with women before going to Syria, there were those more interested in the benefits of jihad than they were in the cause. The promise of virgins (*houris*) that, according to Islam, a martyr would get in heaven was, one former foreign fighter from Central Asia explained, the reason some fought:

I was so tired of discussions about *houris* in my unit. It was the only thing guys, particularly from Central Asia, thought about, and they never stopped talking about it. Before going on military operations, many would say, “I hope to die today because I already see my *houris* waiting for me.” We also had one very young guy in the group who would ejaculate just talking about *houris*.

In general, sex related topics were so popular among regular fighters and Islamist religious leaders alike that even one of the most common religious ideological disagreements on the frontline was whether anal sex is permitted in Islam.

There were other reasons as well. For the professional mercenaries, experts in their military specialty, and people involved in weapons trade, it was money. According to an interviewed foreigner who, in addition to fighting, was engaged in the weapons trade, “We were actually thinking about going to Libya, but did not manage to get there on time. If not Syria, we would have gone somewhere else. There is always a war somewhere on the planet.”

Then there were those who believed the conflict was about power and fame. Chechen fighters going to ISIS were often accused by other Chechens

of leaving instead of defending Chechnya against the Russians. Other Chechens went to Syria to train so they could return to Chechnya and fight the Russians. According to members of one Chechen unit, “We came here to practice in operations and stay in shape. We are waiting and training here to be able to return back to Chechnya.”

Other foreigners went because they were involved in criminal activities, and as a result had problems with the law in their home country. They saw Syria as a place they could hide. According to a Chechen fighter who came to Syria after living in Turkey, “There were people who were wanted for rape and pedophilia in Turkey, so they left to Syria. They are telling everyone that they came to fight for the goal, but soon, after they feel comfortable, they get back to their criminal activities.”

Some foreigners who went to Syria were interested in personal monetary gains. For example, one interviewed former ISIS foreign fighter from Central Asia admitted that before coming to Syria he was involved in shoplifting in malls in Russia and Turkey but saw Syria as a better opportunity for self-enrichment.

And then some people simply wanted to fight. According to a foreign fighter from Dagestan, one of his friends from Ingushetia (before coming to Syria) had planned to join the French Foreign Legion. “Fighting was his thing. He was strong and brave, loved sports, and was very good at shooting,” remembered his comrade. Another interviewed former foreign fighter admitted that he tried to join the army back home in one of the Central Asian republics, but he was not eligible because he did not have a father and was considered a breadwinner for his family. Leaving his family and going to Syria gave him the opportunity he wanted.

Finally, some people wanted to be heroes. According to an Uzbek former foreign fighter, “One sixteen-year-old fighter on my *ribat* [frontline position] was badly wounded in his face. His emir came and wanted to clean the fighter’s face with his T-shirt. The fighter asked to use his own T-shirt instead, so that, after he died, the emir could send it to his mom. Then she’d know her son ‘only looked forward and never turned back.’”

Those were understandable reasons to go to Syria, but to understand the whole picture, it is also important to consider why these people so willingly left their home country. While some went with a positive perspective (going *to* something), others went with a negative perspective (getting *away* from something).

According to one local Jabhat al-Nusra fighter in a group with many foreigners, “Foreigners came because they wanted to defend us, and they wanted to have a meaning in their life. They wanted to run away from that very fast-forward life. They were sick of a life that pushed them to keep working for money and no meaning. Again, those people came for us, and for themselves.”

Some converted to Islam and came to Syria only after a long journey through different ideologies, trying to find a meaningful frame for their lives. One Russian convert from the Tumen region (in Siberia), before converting to Islam, was a member of a neo-Nazi group whose main goal in Russia was to fight against Muslims from the Caucasus. According to his friend in ISIS, who ironically was himself originally from the Caucasus, “He was a very usual guy, not a crazy fanatic, nothing special . . . he did not even talk much.”³

In more extended interviews, it became apparent that many foreign fighters, in fact, had issues with their home countries that helped push them to the foreign battlefield. For Abu Mariam, his problem was with European policies:

I can't live my own way in Western countries because they are racist and don't believe in religious freedom. They sin twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week, but deprive me of a five-minute prayer. In France, [Muslim] women are not allowed to wear a *niqab* [a cloth that covers the face], which is required by Islam. A woman caught wearing one is charged 150 euros. But if someone decides to go out naked, nobody would utter a word about this, claiming it to be “freedom.”

Khalid left because he was not satisfied with the leadership in Saudi Arabia: “We cannot talk of an ‘army’ in my home country. They are dictators, not Muslims! They are only fighting to preserve thrones [government], not the cause of Allah.”

Individuals from Central Asia had problems with domestic law enforcement because of their religion, and came to Syria after first working in Russia in low-level occupations and feeling like a second-rate person. In Russia, they could not find high-level jobs and native Russians often discriminated

³ Later this person appeared in an ISIS propaganda video, beheading individuals accused of spying for Russia.

against them in everyday matters like renting an apartment, admitting their children to schools, dating, and marriage. At the same time, groups like ISIS were very clearly stating in their propaganda that there was no nationalism among them and that all Muslims were equal no matter where they were from.⁴ Everyone would be welcomed to ISIS with open arms.

Many fighters from the Caucasus had a deep grievance against the Russian government, and had tried, unsuccessfully, to become part of the insurgency back home. According to one fighter from Chechnya, “Before coming to Syria, for two years I tried to join brothers fighting an insurgency in the forest, but I was not able to find contacts. So we started our own group, but it did not work out because we quickly ran out of money. Then I decided that there was no point in sitting at home; I needed to go somewhere where I could participate in jihad.”

Many Uzbek fighters tried to join the Islamic Movement in Uzbekistan (IMU), based in Afghanistan and Waziristan (Pakistan), before coming to Syria. According to one Uzbek former foreign fighter, “After Osh riots [ethnic conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbek in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, in 2010], I was thinking about joining the IMU. I had a classmate there, but I did not have enough money, so I went to work in Russia instead. While I was in Russia, my classmate relocated to Syria from Waziristan, so I joined him there.”

Even on the frontlines in Syria, some Russian-speaking foreign fighters not only dedicated most of their free time to following and sharing news from back home on social media but even actively tried to effect political change. For example, during the Russian presidential elections, some Russian-speaking foreign fighters actively promoted a liberal opposition candidate—which got them in trouble among their unit-mates because democratic elections are against their understanding of Islam.⁵

Their different grievances meant foreign fighters had different interests and goals than their local counterparts. To further confirm this, interviewed foreign fighters were asked about their ultimate goal for fighting (beyond Syria). For one fighter from Algeria, Syria was just the

⁴ ISIS members often cited the following hadith to support this claim: “Rasulullah said on the authority of Ubayy Bin Ka’b: ‘If anyone proudly asserts his descent in the manner of the pre-Islamic people, tell him to bite his father’s penis, and do not use a euphemism.’” (Mishkat Al-Masabih, Vol. 2, p. 1021).

⁵ The official position of many Islamist groups fighting in Syria is that voting in elections is a political power of people, while the only rightful political power is that of God.

beginning: “After Syria, if we are still alive, we head to Golan and then straight to Jerusalem . . . and Palestine will be our place of government.” Abu Mariam agreed with this position: “The Levant does not only include Syria: it also includes Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine, and we are always keeping an eye on Jerusalem.” Khalid was concerned about the affairs in his home country: “I have made an oath that, if I am not martyred in Syria, I will go back and fight to free the Arabian Peninsula.” Various fighters from Chechnya openly acknowledged the Syrian civil war was a crucial training ground for future operations inside of Chechnya and, more generally, Russia. Abu Bakr, a member of the Chechen group Afnad al-Kavkaz, said, “Syria is a good training ground, but we are keeping our eye on the situation in Chechnya, and as soon as Kadirov [president of Chechnya] or Putin die, we will go back.”

Despite the great variation in their motives, foreign fighters were united in their dedication to their respective goals. Even before they left their homes, the majority of fighters clearly understood that not only was there a very small chance they would ever return (even if they survived combat), but it was also entirely possible they might never make it to Syria. For some it was relatively easy because their travel was accommodated by either governments or other armed groups. For example Russia provided passports and even tickets to travel to Turkey from some individuals they did not want on their territory. Or when in 2015 in Afghanistan the conflict between Taliban and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan started, Taliban offered IMU money and transportation to Iran so that they could peacefully leave to Syria, according to an Uzbek foreign fighter presented on those meetings. For majority, on the other side, there were many hurdles to overcome, and it took great commitment to just get to Syria.

First, potential group members had to find a contact in Syria willing to help them join the battlefield, and it was often not easy. In his interview, a fighter from Central Asia explained how he got to Syria. First, he asked around mosques in Moscow, looking for anyone with connections to the fighting, but with little luck. “They thought I worked for the FSB [Russian Internal Security] and did not want to talk to me,” he said. “Several mosques even kicked me out.” He admitted to being so frustrated that he even planned to conduct a terrorist attack in Moscow. He wanted to put a homemade bomb into the gas tank of a police car, but was not able to make a bomb at home. Finally, he did a search on social media for “Syria” and “war” typed in the Russian Cyrillic alphabet, and asked anyone he found

about how to join the fight. Many Chechens and Dagestanis offered to help at first but later changed their minds; they did not trust him either. Finally, one person told him to buy a plane ticket as a signal of commitment. When he did, he was given contacts on the ground in Turkey, where he spent his own money to buy essential military equipment before crossing into Syria. "I wanted to get to Syria so badly that I even sent my contact in Syria a copy of my passport, not thinking there could be FSB agents on the other side."

Next, a potential group member had to leave home quickly enough to reach Turkey before his family noticed his absence and raised the alarm. All kinds of tricks were employed here. For example, one woman from Kyrgyzstan claimed she was going shopping in Turkey. Because her grandmother also wanted to visit Turkey, the girl took her grandmother with her all the way to Syria. Luckily for her, the Uzbek group, Imam Bukhari, agreed to take both of them. Men from Central Asia often claimed they were traveling to Russia to look for a job. Russian recruits who still lived with their parents often told them they were traveling to a sporting event in another town and would be gone for several days, which gave them enough time to cross to Syria.

Finally, prospective fighters had to trick the authorities. Leaving for Turkey from some countries was relatively easy, but other countries did not want their citizens to join the war, and they made it difficult. In some cases Chechens had to travel on foot for several months through the Caucasus Mountains and Georgia (illegally) to get to Turkey. Some potential fighters from Kazakhstan had to first go to another Central Asian republic, buy a fake passport, and fly from there, so as not to be stopped by Kazakh security. But according to all interviewed former foreign fighters, the most complicated journey was undertaken by Uighur prospects, coming from China. According to a Central Asian former fighter who was in an Uighur group in Syria:

Uighurs did not have passports, so they had to travel from China to Syria, illegally, by land. The journey took around seven months because they would often be arrested and spend time in deportation prisons on the way. It was also very expensive. Prospective fighters and their families would sell everything they had and spend between five and ten thousand dollars on the journey. By the time they reached Turkey, they were so tired that they often took a several months' vacation in Turkey before crossing into Syria to start training.

In several known cases, Uighur prospective fighters had to kill someone on their way to Turkey just to avoid being arrested or delayed on the journey.

Choosing a Group

Compared to local fighters who could easily be in Syria and not be part of the armed group, foreigners had to be part of an organization at all times. Because they did not know the local dynamics, they needed the protection of the organization. And compared to local fighters, they could not rely on family for support, and it was hard to find a civilian job. Being outside of the group meant they could face serious money-related problems.⁶

In many ways, foreign fighters employed the same logic local fighters did in choosing a group to fight with. First, they chose the goal they wanted to fight for and then they chose from among the groups that fought for that goal. At the same time, there were many difficulties in this process for foreign fighters, making their path less straightforward than that of their local counterparts.

First, many foreign fighters were not familiar with the country, did not have a broad network of contacts, and, in many cases, did not even speak the language. This rash of unfamiliarity made it particularly challenging for them to navigate the complicated world of armed groups. In addition, the environment for the foreign fighters and attitudes toward them during the Syrian civil war were in constant flux, further reducing their options as time went on. Those conditions put them at the mercy of several group leaders willing to exploit them for their own benefit.

Second, compared to local Syrian armed groups, from the very onset of the conflict, foreign groups were much more sensitive to transfers between groups. Local armed groups were mostly interested in toppling Assad, and since all local groups were fighting for that goal, and at least in the beginning of the conflict where there were few resources involved, it was

⁶ For example, in 2017 money was collected among supporters for (original spelling) “a brother who is a muhijr and works media but he is married with one child and a new baby on the way many times the brother can barely afford to pay for milk or dippers, at onetime his wife mixed leben and water to give it the baby and the baby ended up getting sick this is how dire there situation is. He received a monthly *ratib* [salary] of 20,000 lyra but its not enough to take care of his family for a month so this is why we are asking for donation.”

not important for most leaders which group a particular fighter would be fighting with, as long as he was fighting against Assad. But many foreign group leaders, from the very beginning, were more interested in their personal power and, as a consequence, in the size of their group. In addition, the pool of foreign fighters was smaller, and many foreign groups invested in their fighters by bringing them into Syria to begin with. They were not enthusiastic about losing this investment and engaged in all kinds of propaganda to prevent this from happening. Fighters recalled that they had to be quietly smuggled at night to other groups; otherwise, a major scandal would ensue.

As a result, choosing a group was essentially a two-step process for a foreign fighter. The first step was to choose a goal he wanted to fight for and identify groups that were fighting for that goal and willing to take foreigners. From those, the fighter had to choose a particular group to join. And while some groups were fighting for certain popular aims (such as fighting against Assad), only one group stood for building an Islamic state.

To shed some light on how foreign fighters chose a goal to fight for, I will refer to the fighting history of two interviewed Russian-speaking fighters—Ali from the Caucasus and Mohamed from Central Asia. Because they went to Syria early in the conflict and switched to various major groups several times, their stories well illustrate the complicated movements of foreign fighters between groups and allow us to examine their motives and underlying reasoning.

After driving by car from his native republic in the Caucasus to Azerbaijan (so as not to be detected by Russian law enforcement) and then taking a flight from there to Turkey, Ali and two of his friends first went to the group of Seifullah al-Shishani in Kafr Hamra, because it was the only group they found contacts with. At that point, he did not even know that, several days before they arrived, the group had separated from Jaish Muhajireen wa Ansar because of an internal conflict between its leaders, Seifullah al-Shishani and Umar Shishani (leader of Jaish Muhajireen wa Ansar). Because he arrived during Ramadan, he did not go through a regular boot camp. Instead, according to him,

For several weeks we were doing nothing but drinking coffee and making videos to be distributed on internet . . . the only military job we were doing was setting checkpoints to guard the huge house of our emir, Seifullah al-Shishani, who even without us guarding him, he had dozens

of bodyguards. Everyone was laughing at us and our *complicated and dangerous military assignment*.

They started voicing this problem to the emir. Seifullah al-Shishani understood that the disagreement could get serious and sent the people who complained the most to the group of his friend, Muslim al-Shishani, who was then based near Kasab. Although it was also not an active frontline, it was better because, according to Ali, “He gave us a house that was once a firefighting station. We had one *ribat* [position] on the frontline where we sat in shifts looking at the enemy through night vision . . . At least it was more like a war.” Once, Muslim al-Shishani even made a training exercise for them: “Since it was our first military exercise, it was hard . . . we actually marched through the forest and mountains. We were very impressed.”

With time, more and more people who came to fight jihad with Seifullah al-Shishani’s group started raising questions about their whole purpose of being in Syria. They had not seen anything even close to the jihad they came to wage. There was no fighting, and they noticed that the leaders were absolutely not interested in religion. “They had beards, and as far as I know, prayed, but it was as far as it went with religion,” commented Ali. “Seifullah al-Shishani was just released from prison before coming to Syria and was more into money and fame.”

Soon, the most religiously educated person in their group (Abu Khanifa Uzbeki), who spoke Arabic and had studied religion in Egypt before coming to Syria, thought that their group should join other bigger groups and engage in actual war. He visited such groups as al-Nusra and ISIS and decided that ISIS would be better because they said they were the true group fighting for Islam (more about this in Chapters 7 and 8). He went to Seifullah al-Shishani and openly told him that he thought they needed to join ISIS. Not only did Seifullah al-Shishani refuse, but even raising this topic led to a major conflict inside of the group. He accused Abu Khanifa Uzbeki of starting *fitna* (infighting) and others of not following the oath to him as an emir. Even so, a group of ten to twenty people, Ali among them, took their few belongings from the base and moved to an ISIS base.

While Ali was in Kasab, a very young man from Central Asia named Mohamed contacted them and expressed a desire to join them in jihad. After a long discussion in the group, they decided to invite him in. When Mohamed came to Turkey, group representatives met him in Istanbul, bought him a bus ticket to a town close to Syria, and sent him to a safe

house, where he waited for a smuggler to take him across the border. There were fifteen other foreigners in that house, all going to different groups. Some were going to Jabhat al-Nusra, others to the Emirate Caucasus, and several like him were going to the group of Seifullah al-Shishani. None of the recruits in that house had any idea of what was awaiting them in Syria, and they did not know enough to differentiate between their goals and the internal organization of the various groups. “The only person I found that would help me get to Syria was from the Seifullah al-Shishani group,” Mohamed said. “So that is why I joined them.” He did not even realize that, by the time he arrived in Syria, his initial contact was long gone.

After several unsuccessful crossing attempts, Mohamed made it into Syria and was taken to a small base, where he met his group. Most of them were foreign fighters from Azerbaijan who warmly welcomed him, and he even briefly met Seifullah al-Shishani himself. “He asked me why I wasn’t wearing a uniform and ordered one of his fighters to go to the market to buy me one,” remembers Mohamed. “At that time, I noticed that he did not have any religious knowledge, but he took very good care of his fighters—uniform, food, relations.”

The next day Mohamed was moved again, this time to a camp with many foreigners from Dagestan. It was a relatively sizeable camp where several groups—Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Umar al-Kuwaiti group, and the group of Seifullah al-Shishani—were training together. His group had thirty Russian-speaking people from the Caucasus and Central Asia and one Iranian Kurd. Because the official language in the group was Russian, the Iranian Kurd quickly switched to Jabhat al-Nusra, saying that Arabic, the official language in that group, was easier for him to understand.

Soon after Mohamed moved to that base, disagreements between foreign and local fighters started to erupt inside the camp. According to him, the main point of conflict was religion. Many foreign fighters did not like that the local FSA members did not attend a morning prayer. Many of the local regime deserters also wore their original uniforms, which was also a huge point of religious contention for foreigners because its secular insignia (a depiction of a hawk on the Syrian coat of arms) was against Islam. One local fighter was even shot dead for smoking, behavior that many foreigners considered against Islam.

Despite attempts to mitigate these conflicts, they were not isolated to Mohamed’s camp. Conflicts between foreign and local fighters erupted all over the frontline, and the FSA gave all foreign fighters an ultimatum: they

could either go home or go to Iraq, but they had to go—and they had only three days to leave. As a result, many small foreign groups joined bigger and more powerful groups for protection. The main group of choice was Jabhat al-Nusra because it had an agreement with the FSA, and its foreign members were not targeted. Mohamed's leader, Seifullah al-Shishani, also announced they were joining Jabhat al-Nusra,⁷ but Mohamed was not sure how he felt about it.

He had heard about Umar al-Kuwaiti, a group leader who offered to teach him about Islam. "I went to the Umar al-Kuwaiti group and told them I wanted to stay with them and not go to Jabhat al-Nusra," remembers Mohamed. "At that point, I did not know anything about religion, even what Tawheed was, and I was scared to die before learning about Islam and not becoming a *shaheed*." But when the news about his desire to join another group reached his leader, it led to a major scandal, and he heard on the radio that Umar al-Kuwaiti was accused of stealing Seifullah al-Shishani fighters. Because Mohamed did not want to be the center of a conflict, he agreed to remain with his commander and move to Jabhat al-Nusra. At that time, ISIS was still a small group that, Mohamed said, "controlled two to three bases with no more than thirty people at each."

ISIS was the main target of the FSA's attacks on foreigners. The option of joining ISIS was not even on the table. Mohamed remembered when his group was moving to a major Jabhat al-Nusra base in Kafr Hamra in the Aleppo governorate. His group was stopped at an FSA checkpoint, where an FSA fighter asked, "Are those animals from ISIS?" (referring to him and the other foreign fighters). The local driver managed to assure the FSA guard they were with Jabhat al-Nusra, and they were waved through. Some foreign fighters, however, were not so lucky and were captured by FSA. Seifullah al-Shishani had to personally go to FSA leadership and negotiate their release.

Mohamed's group was only one of many foreign groups at the Kafr Hamra base. They were not allowed to leave the base because of the FSA attacks against foreigners and were supposed to wait for their leader to come tell

⁷ According to a foreign fighter who was at the meeting between Seifullah al-Shishani and Jabhat al-Nusra, Seifullah agreed go into operations under al-Nusra command for a portion of the loot that would be taken during the operation and al-Nusra would allow foreigners to move to Syria with family members (before there was limited accommodation for families).

them their next move. According to Mohamed, although they were there with Jabhat al-Nusra for almost two months, they trained separately.

Meanwhile, the dispute between FSA and foreign fighters escalated to open armed conflict. According to Mohamed, “Every night someone got killed. Foreigners were taking down FSA fighters or vice versa.” Then rumors began to circulate that foreign fighters deployed to distant positions had left their families behind in safe towns under the control of FSA, whom they had considered a friendly group. The rumors were that when the fighters had gone back, their wives had either been killed or disappeared, and that it was because FSA fighters were raping, killing, and enslaving them.

The FSA did not deny those accusations, and Mohamed was not sure what to think. He was able to watch the FSA channel at the base, and they often spoke about their success against the foreign fighters. Although even at that point it was not clear how true the rumors were, they caused large-scale panic among the foreign fighters. “How is the FSA better than Assad?” Mohamed thought. “They are both monsters!” After that he decided to switch to ISIS.⁸

Another issue that played a role in Mohamad’s decision was that, as a foreigner in Jabhat al-Nusra, he always felt like an outsider. In ISIS, he would be surrounded by Russian-speaking people from former Soviet Union states and was sure he would feel more comfortable. By then, ISIS was rapidly gaining territory everywhere in the country except the town they were in; there, ISIS was very weak and was actually losing territory. According to Mohamed, “They were controlling only three streets and were completely surrounded.”

When Seifullah al-Shishani finally showed up, with Jabhat al-Nusra flags flying from the sides of his car, he immediately called a meeting. About a hundred foreign fighters (mostly Chechens) were there, many of whom were disappointed because they had not participated in a major operation in a while. Seifullah had two things to say. First, he announced their next military operation: liberating a prison in Aleppo. Second, he wanted to reassure his fighters they were staying with Jabhat al-Nusra.⁹ He explained that

⁸ It is important to note that it is still not clear if those rumors were true, but later fighters started thinking that in fact they were not true, and ISIS was spreading those rumors to persuade foreign fighters to join their ranks.

⁹ According to a former foreign fighter present at the negotiations between Seifullah al-Shishani and leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra, Seifullah agreed to join al-Nusra in military operations in exchange for a fair share of loot and accommodations for foreign fighters’ families.

the conflict between foreigners and locals was exaggerated, and that even if it was true, it was initiated by ISIS. They would stay with Jabhat al-Nusra despite its declaration of neutrality in the foreign fighter disagreement.

Mohamed's small group of comrades were standing together in the corner. They delegated a person to ask the question: "How can we do nothing when FSA is killing our women?" Seifullah dismissed his question, saying that those rumors were not true because there were no witnesses and no evidence. "Of course there were no witnesses," Mohamed's friend retorted. "No man would openly say that his wife was raped!" Then Seifullah started yelling at them, and his bodyguards intervened and stopped the discussion.

Those events pushed Mohamed and his friends to make a choice. It was useless to stay with Jabhat al-Nusra, so they changed their initial reason for fighting. Instead of fighting against Assad's regime, they would fight to protect the wives of foreign fighters, and to do that, they would have to join ISIS.

Some people on the base tried to stop them because ISIS was surrounded and Mohamed and his friends could not do anyone any good by helping them. Others accused them of switching out of fear of the upcoming prison operation. But Mohamed and his friends were absolutely sure of their decision and did not care what anybody said. "ISIS controlled only three streets, and the fighting was intensifying, but it did not bother us. We wanted to switch to ISIS and were not afraid to die," Mohamed explained.

Joining a group on the other side of the frontline, and where they did not know anyone, was easier said than done. Fortunately for Mohamed, he knew some members of the Russian-speaking Caucasus house¹⁰ fighting with ISIS. Eventually, Mohamed and his friends were able to negotiate with them and were accepted into ISIS and warmly welcomed. Seifullah al-Shishani, however, was not happy to lose group members. He made them return not only their weapons but even their uniforms.

Because ISIS was completely surrounded in their town and was trying to break the siege, combat was very active and, according to Mohamed, "Every day there were several people killed at every position." As a result, many ISIS foreign fighters who were not eager to die ironically switched to al-Nusra, doing the opposite of what Mohamed had done. "They did not hide their

¹⁰ A thirty-person assault group from the Caucasus, at that time considered to be one of the most effective frontline units in ISIS.

motivation,” Mohamed explained, without any judgment. “They wanted their families to be safe, and Jabhat al-Nusra ensured their protection.”

Later, after ISIS broke the siege and managed to join their brothers-in-arms, it was announced that they would enact sharia law in ISIS-controlled territory. This appealed to a different subset of foreign fighters switching from Jabhat al-Nusra. They found the goals of ISIS more appealing. “Jabhat al-Nusra was only interested in fighting Assad, while ISIS was dedicated to building an Islamic state and enforcing sharia law,” commented Mohamed.

But some of those groups and individual fighters who switched groups were not entirely forthright in the motivation they claimed. Some of them switched to ISIS only after it was already controlling a large territory, and many fighters suspected they had intentionally waited until the situation calmed and avoided the major battles before making the switch. Other groups merged with ISIS only after they ran out of money and were not able to raise funds in their home communities anymore. One foreign fighter commented, “Jabhat al-Nusra was paying monthly payments, its amount depending on the number of wives and kids, but it was not a big amount. ISIS was paying significantly more, so many people switched there to feed their families.”¹¹

What was also important for fighters in their decision to switch was a group’s affiliation with al-Qaeda. And at that point, it was unclear for many who the heir of al-Qaeda was in Syria—ISIS or al-Nusra. Due to the prestige of the organization, many individuals wanted to be part of al-Qaeda, so both al-Nusra and ISIS were trying hard to prove they were representing al-Qaeda leadership in Syria, employing all kinds of propaganda and deception.

At the same time, some foreign fighters were interested in less abstract ideas of Islam, not in being part of a prestigious terrorist organization. Some interviewed former foreign fighters who were also in Seifullah al-Shishani’s group (with Ali and Mohamed), instead of switching to more radical groups such as al-Nusra and ISIS, switched to a small Turkish group that was mostly distributing aid to the local population. According to them, “We did not like the infighting that was starting and did not want to die in it or even to take part in it.”

¹¹ It is interesting to note that the Russian word used here for monthly payments, “пособие,” in translation is closer to “welfare” than it is to “salary.”

Others had their individual goals that they were following in their switching trajectory. According to their comrades, some people joined ISIS because they wanted to go to Iraq, and others wanted to sacrifice their life only fighting against Assad and as a result wanted to join groups stationed close to Damascus (and joined, for example, the Uzbek group Bukhari). Some foreign fighters did not care which group they died with and switched to the group where the line for suicide operations was the shortest.¹²

By the time ISIS declared a caliphate, the differences between the goals of groups that still admitted foreign fighters became crystal clear, and foreign fighters sorted out those groups based on their aims. If one wanted to fight Assad, his most likely choice was Jabhat al-Nusra and its affiliates; if one was interested in building an Islamic state or enjoying power, ISIS was more appealing. Abu Mansour, the man who worked in Turkey to discourage Russian-speaking foreigners from joining the fight in Syria, commented, “Although al-Nusra also developed ambitions for power over time, they were honest at the beginning, and foreigners who wanted to help Syrians joined them. People who wanted to rule went to ISIS.” Soon this information reached each group’s supporters abroad, and prospective fighters also became aware of the differences in goals between groups that were still admitting foreigners. Even before coming to Syria, they already knew which group they were going to join.

For example, according to one of the members of Jabhat al-Nusra from Tajikistan:

When I crossed to Syria, it was not clear what was going on. There was a mess with refugees leaving. Some fighters saw me and started yelling, “*Muhajir!*” [foreigner]. One brother said, “Turkistan” [referring to the Turkistan Islamic Party, one of the fighting groups]. They picked me up and drove somewhere. I was not sure where they were driving me. The only thing I was sure about is that I did not want to go to ISIS. I was telling them, “Not ISIS, not ISIS,” but they did not seem to understand me. They got me to the Turkistan base. Thank God I had a working phone with a Turkish SIM card, so I called brothers and asked them to tell those guys not to bring me to ISIS. At the end, they got me to the office of my group.

¹² Those people rarely made their true motivation public, afraid that, in this case, God would not accept their sacrifice.

As a result, after the summer of 2014, ISIS attracted a different wave of foreigners. Instead of coming to Syria to fight and die, foreigners were now coming to live. While Jabhat al-Nusra was still clear that its main job was fighting, ISIS's utopian propaganda played a major role in attracting both fighters and civilians, heralding the dawn of an Islamic state where oppressed Muslims were free to live and practice their religion safely. Many even brought schoolbooks for their children from back home so as to not interrupt their children's education. On one hand, they were going to an Islamic state where they were pleased to hear the sound of an *azan* calling for prayer and with leadership they considered truly Muslim. But on the other hand, ISIS propaganda depicted Syria as a comfortable place to live. Abu Mansour, who now lives in Turkey and is known in religious circles for discouraging Muslims from post-Soviet states from taking part in ISIS activities, wondered, "Why did those people not consider going to, say, Mauritania? Mauritania is also a Muslim country where one could study Islam and speak Arabic. Foreigners did not move there [Mauritania] because life there is very hard—there are no Western-style houses and people live in tents, while Syria is comfortable."

Many people came because they wanted to enjoy the benefits offered by the group, and in terms of material benefits, life was good. They received free houses, did not have to pay utilities, had free medical care,¹³ had electricity, and were respected in the society, all things they did not have at home. According to Abu Mansour, there were many prospective fighters who wanted to join ISIS so they could get several wives and slaves. One individual went to Syria with the sole aim of getting a free three-bedroom apartment.¹⁴ He came not to fight, but to work on the Tabqa Dam as an engineer.

Some people came because they were persecuted in their home countries for their religion. One Russian convert to Islam who, at the time of the interview, was fighting in Syria acknowledged that he went to Syria because he did not feel safe in Russia: "I faced a lot of pressure from my government

¹³ Medical care (including dental) was free for group members in public hospitals. If a public hospital could not perform a necessary procedure, a group member would be referred to a private clinic and ISIS would reimburse the costs.

¹⁴ According to ISIS rules, only a family is given a free apartment. If a fighter dies, his widow is moved to a hotel. When one fighter died, his widow insisted that her brother back in Chechnya come and join ISIS so that she could keep her apartment. Apparently he and family back home decided that it was a good idea.

because I am a converted Muslim. They came to my house several times searching for anything to use against me, but they found nothing.” So he moved his family to Turkey and went to fight in Syria.

When asked about who the most oppressed foreigners in their home countries were, many foreign fighters in the interview cited Uzbeks, who made up a sizable group of foreigners in Syria (relative to the size of their country). According to a former ISIS foreign fighter from Dagestan, “It’s not surprising there are so many Uzbeks here. The government in Uzbekistan is so anti-Muslim that people can’t even go to a mosque without raising suspicion. There, only old people can have a beard, and you can get arrested if police find a prayer rug in your car.”¹⁵ At the same time, those people had very limited options for peaceful emigration because it was very hard for them to get a visa to any Western country and it was very unlikely they could get refugee status anywhere. In addition, if the government of Uzbekistan was looking for them, such countries as Russia and Turkey (main destinations for Uzbeki emigrants) would deport them back home, where most likely they would be tortured in prison.

So for them, Syria seemed like a country where they would be safe from their home government. Those people sold their houses and cars¹⁶ and brought their families to Syria and Iraq. Some did not even go through a military boot camp and did not even own a weapon. In one such case, an extended family from Tajikistan needed three whole buses to cross to Syria; they even took their seventy-year-old grandmother with them.

There were also individuals who thought the caliphate was an Islamic state, and only there would they be able to study religion. They expected ISIS to facilitate their studies, freeing them from all other duties. For example, an ISIS member from Dagestan explained, “I had lived in Moscow, where I drank and did drugs. Then I realized that I would have to pay for everything I did in the afterlife. I moved to Dagestan to be away from the big city and its sins, and then when there was the option to go to Syria to live in the Islamic State, I couldn’t wait to go.”

¹⁵ Uzbekistan has a freedom ranking similar to North Korea and, according to human rights organizations, has a “wide-scale violation of virtually all basic human rights,” with the majority of those violations against members of religious organizations, independent journalists, and human rights activists.

¹⁶ Even 10,000 U.S. dollars was a large amount of money in ISIS-controlled territory, and a family could live on it for several years.

Some people came for personal reasons, and for one it was a painful divorce. One man from Azerbaijan came to ISIS with his three young daughters after going through a complicated divorce process. He did not want to fight, only to start a new life in a new place. Until his death, he lived peacefully near the Turkish border looking after his daughters on a full-time basis.¹⁷ People even came looking for better medical care. One woman from the Caucasus had an eleven-year-old daughter with cancer. Watching ISIS propaganda, she thought that the level of medical care in ISIS was higher than in her home county and decided to bring her daughter there for treatment.¹⁸

In some instances, people joined ISIS against their will. When one father from Dagestan decided to join ISIS with his two wives, children, and extended family, they were logistically unable to relocate to Syria from Russia in one group. His older son was against the whole idea of joining ISIS, but local traditions dictated that he could not object to his father. They agreed that the family would be divided into two groups, and that the son would help move the second group. After his father found a place in Syria, his son brought the rest of the family. His plan was to accompany the group until his father met them inside of Syria, and then return back home to Russia. Unfortunately, when he entered Syria, ISIS did not allow him to leave, and he was drafted.¹⁹ This example of a son who was forced to stay against his will was an exception; usually ISIS was trying to persuade fathers coming to get their sons (out of ISIS) to stay.

Although, after joining ISIS, people might have thought about switching to another group, it was not possible. Once the caliphate was proclaimed, ISIS closed its borders, and as a result, free movement between ISIS and other groups completely stopped. At that point, switching occurred only between different units within ISIS. But it did not mean there were no more decisions group members had to make.

First, they had to choose a unit within ISIS. Foreign fighters deciding between units looked for what local fighters did: the group that had the best

¹⁷ He was killed by ISIS in 2015 when a group of Azerbaijanis were accused of plotting a coup. His daughters were given as wives to a local emir.

¹⁸ When she came to ISIS, she was placed in a two-bedroom apartment with one room for women and another for female slaves. It was an apartment where fighters raped their victims. ISIS soon started pressing her to marry off her daughter. A month later, she managed to leave and went to Europe, where her daughter received the necessary medical treatment.

¹⁹ His relatives believe that he died in combat in 2016, while some of his family members in Syria were still alive as of summer 2017.

leadership and the most organization, that took care of its members, and that made the best use of their skills. According to one former ISIS foreign fighter, “Different units were just like different military bases in any country.”

While many incoming fighters already knew which unit they wanted to be part of (because of friends and relatives), others were assigned by the group. Those who were assigned, after learning about other units, tried to transfer to the better ones. In ISIS, there was an official procedure for that. First, a fighter had to obtain permission from both his emir and the emir of the unit he wanted to transfer to. Although former ISIS fighters claimed emirs did not like fighters to leave (because it weakened their unit), if the reason was valid, they did not object.

Because the salary was the same in all units, money was not the reason for transferring. Instead, because so many of the units were specialized, people sometimes changed units to change their job description (for instance, a sniper or an explosives expert). Fighters also moved if they had a problem with leadership, wanted to be in the same unit as friends, or wanted to be in a unit where everyone spoke their language or were of the same nationality.

Sometimes, the reason for a transfer was not a fighter himself, but his wife. For example, in Shaddad, there was a powerful Kazakh unit famous for taking very good care of fighters’ wives. In particular, they handled problems often faced by the women, such as getting internet access, transportation, food, and medical issues.²⁰ So in some cases, when marrying someone from this unit, a bride stipulated that her husband would not switch to another unit.

People who were disillusioned with ISIS but were not able to leave also looked for a unit that shared their views. And although it was a very dangerous enterprise, there were such units. In 2015, rumors circulated that the unit of Khatab Azeri, stationed on the border with Turkey, did not fight but lived a peaceful life. When one of the interviewed foreign fighters became disillusioned with ISIS and stopped fighting, he went to the Khatab Azeri base. Although he did not talk to the leader of the group, he met other people who were also looking for a unit that was the least engaged with ISIS. One fighter had been kicked out of his old unit for refusing to participate in combat operations.²¹

²⁰ Very often, foreign women in ISIS who did not speak Arabic and did not have a car had a difficult time taking care of even those basic problems.

²¹ That fighter was later publicly executed by ISIS.

Some units were short on manpower, so ISIS asked for volunteers. Early on, when the caliphate was flooded with recruits, switching units without written authorization was easy, but over time it became more and more difficult. As a stopgap, ISIS required official permission to switch, and then started sending fighters to Iraq after boot camp, despite their requests to stay in Syria, and refused to allow them to return. By 2016, ISIS had banned all transfers, and even moving between towns became impossible without special permission from an emir.

Next, a group member had to choose an occupation he wanted to engage in. As in any army, there were many options and they differed in risk, prestige, power, and monetary reward.

Some soldiers volunteered for suicide missions. According to one ISIS fighter, “Those were people who honestly thought they would be rewarded with heaven in the afterlife.” Later, more people started volunteering for those missions because they were simply tired of fighting and wanted it all to end sooner. Finally, when it became clear that ISIS would fall, severely wounded fighters who did not see themselves being useful in any other capacity were volunteering. ISIS even had to modify suicide cars to accommodate disabled drivers.

In terms of the risk involved, next were assault units, twelve-member subgroups in each unit. These soldiers were also the most respected, had better income (because they would get the most from the loot distribution), and were preferred in the marriage market because some girls wanted to be wives of a true and fearless *mujahid*.

As in any armed forces, ISIS had a big combat-support group working assignments away from the frontline—weapons lab technicians and repairmen, mechanics, medical workers, checkpoint guards, training camp workers, cooks, and administrators. Some people had specialized tasks. For example, one man was in charge of taking care of fighters’ families and delivering food while their husbands and fathers were on the frontline. Surprisingly, working with explosives was considered a safe occupation. According to one former fighter, “They are sitting on the base stuffing bombs, and even when they need to install it somewhere near the frontline, fighters secure a corridor for them so that they could safely enter and do their job.”

It is also important to mention members of Amni, ISIS’s internal security force. A secret group with separate bases, the Amni were feared not only by civilians, but also by regular ISIS members. Their job was to identify

and catch spies inside of the group. Not only were they paid better than the fighters were, but they received a bonus of roughly \$5,000 per spy.

According to an interviewed local member of Amni, “Because I was a computer scientist, my first job was checking computers of arrested and wanted people for deleted files, messages, and emails.” Later, he was promoted to collecting human intelligence: “I used to go to the barbershops in town and listen while waiting in the line,” he commented. “Also, I went to the mosques after prayers and listened to what people were talking about while I pretended to be reading the Quran. It was a very good place to work, and the salary was high.”

Interviewed former foreign fighters believed group members chose this job because they were more interested in power and money than being on the frontlines. Among Russian-speaking fighters, there was a perception that there are many Uzbek Amni members because “they were so oppressed under their home regime, and in their home country, the most powerful people are members of intelligence. So when they came to ISIS, becoming a member of Amni was their only way they knew to get power.” When I proposed that maybe there were true believers in the Amni who sincerely wanted to protect the group from inside threats, one former ISIS member replied, “We had people who were working close with the Amni, even in assault units. . . . They were not avoiding the dangers of the frontline; they were going on operations like everyone else. Also, we all wanted to protect ISIS and would have notified the emir if we noticed someone suspicious. There was no need to join Amni for that and secretly run around, threatening people.”

Quitting the Fight

In the Syrian civil war, different groups had different approaches to former foreign fighters. While Jabhat al-Nusra and its affiliates allowed both foreign and local fighters to leave when they lost interest in the goals of the war, ISIS had a decidedly different approach. Unlike local fighters, foreign fighters had a much harder time quitting and leaving the group and returning to civilian life. Some problems they faced were similar to those of local fighters. One similarity was that ISIS killed anyone trying to escape on the spot and imprisoned anyone heard discussing it. But other problems that foreign fighters who were thinking of leaving faced were unique to them.

First, foreign fighters had to carefully decide if leaving was worth the risk. Their subjective calculations were complex because they knew law-enforcement officers in their home countries were aware of their activities, so if they were caught going home, they would face long prison sentences and in some cases even death.²² One person from the Caucasus who was personally very involved in smuggling out fighters trying to leave (who is currently in prison for doing so), put it this way: “The best-case scenario [for a former fighter] would be five to six years in prison, and the worst case would be us finding him in the woods with a bullet in his head.” His assessment was not without grounds. According to former ISIS members in hiding, some comrades who were extradited to Russia, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan were never heard from again. As a result, the cost-benefit calculation of leaving was different for them than for local group members. Thus, many foreign fighters who did not want to stay with the group still chose to continue fighting and died on the battlefield.

Second, it was logistically much more difficult for foreign fighters to leave. They were visibly different and could not use civilian documents to pass armed groups’ checkpoints or blend in with refugees. They had to rely on smugglers, but the language barrier made it hard for them to make the necessary contacts to plan their escape. The cost of smuggling a foreigner was also higher than for locals. There were known cases of former ISIS foreign fighters having escaped in the trunks of cars, in ambulances, by walking through the desert with the guidance of Bedouins, and by garnering the help of co-ethnics fighting for a non-ISIS group in Syria. Those arrangements were often made in the home communities of ISIS and non-ISIS fighters, for example back in the Caucasus Mountains, by their relatives. Of course, in those deals money exchanged hands, but traditional clan relations also played a crucial role.

ISIS knew it was difficult for foreigners to leave, and in Hawija, one ISIS territory in Iraq under siege for a long time, foreign fighters were used to prevent local fighters and civilians from escaping. They were assigned to the very front positions that could be used for crossing the frontline. This strategy worked because the language barrier made it much harder for locals to negotiate with foreigners, and the foreigners did not have tribal and family connections that could be used to secure free passage. In addition,

²² In Syria, there is a strong correlation between groups that take foreign fighters and those on the terrorist list.

because foreigners could not escape themselves, they were not interested in letting others out—they needed local ISIS fighters to help them defend the territory and local civilians to use as human shields.

Because individuals joined for different reasons, their behavior inside the group was different, which also affected when and how they left the group. For many, death was the way out. Foreign fighters who came to die for jihad were more likely to volunteer for the most dangerous or even suicidal missions, and thus were killed early in the conflict, achieving their goal. People interested in combat also fought until their last breath and were eventually killed.²³ Those who did not purposely die were those who had joined for other reasons.

Professional fighters who had gone to Syria left when another conflict they were interested in started elsewhere. One Chechen mercenary, who had trained opposition groups in Syria at the beginning of the conflict, left for Ukraine when Russia invaded in 2014 and started his own battalion to train Ukrainian forces. Many other Chechens (from non-ISIS groups) who had come to fight Russia in Syria also relocated to the Ukraine. A good example was the Ajnad al-Kavkaz group, which turned to fighting in the Sheikh Mansour Battalion in Ukraine, where there were more Russians to fight and it was closer to home. Fighters of other nationalities, particularly ones from Central Asia, went to Afghanistan when it became clear that ISIS in Syria and Iraq would fall.

Some foreign fighters who came to participate in the so-called jihad and to die as heroes very soon realized that the situation in Syria was not at all what they thought it would be and nothing like the groups' propaganda had depicted. One former foreign fighter from Central Asia told a humorous story about his shattered illusions:

I got disappointed in jihad before I even entered Syria. When I was still in a safe house in Turkey preparing to cross into Syria, my future emir in an Uzbek group asked me to bring two huge bags of carrots with me to Syria. I was carrying so many carrots that it was basically my entire luggage. Apparently, there were no good carrots in Syria, and they are

²³ In October 2017, after Raqqa had already fallen, one Russian-speaking foreign fighter from the Caucasus was asked if he was planning to try to escape. He replied that he was not planning to do so, and that he would fight until the end. The same week, he and his family were killed by an airstrike in their house in Al Mayadin.

essential to prepare traditional Uzbek food . . . but I kind of felt that it was not this computer-game type of jihad I thought it should have been. I thought I would be carrying weapons and ammunition, but instead it was only carrots.

He left Syria a few months later, at the first opportunity to do so.

The profiles of foreign fighters trying to escape from ISIS also changed over time. At the beginning, individuals escaped one by one by stealing money from the group. Often those people were not satisfied with the fairness of loot division and took revenge by stealing group money. One former ISIS foreign fighter admitted that he had not only stolen several cars before leaving ISIS but had even made them pay for his travel to Turkey by claiming he was going to meet his family there and bring them back to Syria. Often, an ISIS member would receive funds to buy military equipment but would instead abscond with them. During 2014 and 2015, when ISIS was at the apex of its power, a larger group of foreign fighters began leaving: those who accused ISIS leadership of being *kafirs* (non-Muslim) as they realized the Islamic State was not the utopia they had dreamed of. These were extremely religious fighters who had grown dissatisfied with ISIS's brand of Islam. "Everyone I know left because they did not see sharia," said one former fighter interviewed in 2015 (more about these fighters in Chapter 8).

After 2015, when Western military operations against ISIS began, foreign civilians who had come to Syria to live attempted to leave. Some interviewed former ISIS members claimed that they did not like the way the group treated women. "ISIS housed all widows and their kids in one huge house. Then, if you wanted to marry one of them, you just asked sharia court [not the women herself] for permission," commented a former ISIS foreign fighter from Central Asia. Others did not like that ISIS had turned into a police state: "If you wanted to leave the base to go to the market, you needed to notify your leader about where you were going and for how long. And if you did not return on time, you would have a problem."

One ISIS member from the Caucasus who lived in Mayadin, Syria, with his family started trying to leave in 2016. When asked in September 2017 why they had waited so long, he replied, "We were still hoping the situation would normalize, and we would be able to continue with our lives."

Ultimately, foreign leaders who joined for power understood by 2017 that ISIS would not recover from its territorial losses, and they also began to

leave Syria. No one in ISIS could prevent them from doing so and they left with large amounts of the group's money. As a result, they were able to bribe their way out and, in the case of foreign ISIS leaders, able to buy themselves new documents.

Because of their anonymity, many undercover internal security service (Amni) members were also able to just walk away. Not only did these people have access to group funds, but many were not even known to the anti-ISIS coalition, so they did not even have to bribe their way out. While working for ISIS they often wore masks, so once they were free, other fighters and local civilians did not even recognize them.

Conclusion

The decisions foreign fighters made about whether or not to participate in the war were very similar to those of their local brothers-in-arms. They had also chosen to participate in the war for individual goals. However, because foreign fighters came in from the outside, they saw the conflict and its goals very differently than locals did. Foreign fighters also faced more constraints than locals did when it came to choosing a group to fight with. Views of and attitudes about the foreigners varied among local groups, making their participation much more limited, and they had much less latitude in that decision-making process.

Similar to local fighters and their civilian supporters, foreign fighters were lured by different motives, many of which were grievance-driven. Many times, these grievances led them to target both the enemy on the Syrian frontlines and those in their home country. And while not everyone who supported the goals of the war took up a weapon (at least not at the beginning of the conflict), they supported the group with moral and material offerings. In that case, they have yet to resolve their grievance and could most likely be mobilized again for a similar goal in the future.

Compared to local civilian supporters, foreign supporters resided abroad, removed from the realities on the battlefield, and received their news only from propaganda outlets. As a result, they saw the armed groups in a much more positive light than local civilian supporters did.

Those foreigners who had crossed the line and moved to the conflict zone to fight for the group they shared a goal with then looked for a group that

would be the most accommodating and would make the best use of their time, skills, and, potentially, the ultimate sacrifice of their lives.

When local or foreign fighters got disappointed in the goal of the war (for foreign fighters, their initial, imaginary goal did not match what they saw on the ground in Syria), they tried to quit and leave. These foreign fighters who demobilized, however, were disappointed in the organization and in its leadership, not in the idea of building an Islamic state. Compared to their local brothers-in-arms, who could simply switch to another group fighting for the same goal, many foreign fighters were forced to demobilize. There were only a few groups fighting for such strict implementation of sharia, and even fewer who welcomed foreigners. Many of these foreign fighters also had to leave the battlefield without resolving their grievances. In that case, they might be mobilized again for a similar goal in the future.

In addition, fighters who had gone to the battlefield looking for power but were forced to leave when ISIS lost the war will be looking for other places to exercise power. Those places may be other conflicts or criminal activities where they could apply the experience they garnered fighting for ISIS.

The differences in the opinions, goals, and decision of foreigners as compared to locals, and how these affect an armed group's human resource policies, could not pass unnoticed. In the next chapter, I will look at the differences between the management of foreign fighters and their local brothers-in-arms.

6

Handling Foreign Fighters

Skilled and dedicated laborers are an invaluable resource in any organization. A business with no experienced and specialized employees will lag behind and eventually fold. Likewise, there came a time when many Syrian armed groups faltered in organization and combat because they did not have the experienced personnel necessary. Similar to civilian business, groups sought outside expertise, and for rebel groups, this expertise was drawn from an ample supply of foreign fighters.

Since foreign fighters differed in many aspects from their local brothers-in-arms, they did not band together to form the groups as local fighters did originally, but were brought in from the outside to meet specific needs. Local fighters just showed up on the battlefield; foreign fighters joined the conflict only when there was a demand for them.

Conversely, obtaining and managing foreign fighters required a different organizational approach than groups had used for local fighters. They were an asset and could confer significant advantages for an armed group, but mismanaged, they could also become a major liability and eventually destroy it. In this chapter, I will look at the problems armed groups faced in having foreigners in their ranks and how they handled them. In particular, I will look at examples of the human resource policies of two groups, Jabhat al-Nusra and its affiliates, and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), both of which were at the forefront of recruiting foreign fighters. This chapter's research is based on extensive qualitative interviews with active ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra foreign fighters in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq; former fighters hiding in Ukraine, Russia, and Central Asia and their family members; and local fighters who fought alongside foreigners.

Foreign Fighters: Pros

Pairing foreign fighters with armed groups required not only a supply (individuals willing to come to Syria to fight) but also a demand (the armed

groups that needed them). So what was it foreign fighters could offer to the armed groups?

Knowledge and Experience

Foreign fighters possessed knowledge and skills often not available among the local population. An interviewed ISIS foreign fighter from Dagestan had studied mathematics and computer science at the university level and was a welcome addition to ISIS's technical team. Many of the technical drone documents I collected from a factory in Mosul were in English (instead of Arabic), which further confirmed that the majority of people working there were non-Arabic-speaking foreigners. Other foreign fighters were often employed in weapons factories, media offices, and oil facilities.

Also, many brought the necessary military experience, including North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) training, and worked as combat instructors for Syrian fighters, or as elite fighters. According to an ISIS foreign fighter, all trainers even in his entry-level boot camp in Kafr Hamra were very experienced and qualified foreigners, including individuals from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan who had come to Syria via Waziristan and were sniper trainers. Another Waziristan-trained Uzbek expert in topography and a Chechen veteran of both Chechen wars against Russia taught others how to drive military vehicles.¹ One ISIS foreign fighter from Central Asia even complained about how hard his ISIS snipers' training camp was:

One had to have a university degree to succeed. I did three years of medical school at home, so I know enough math to do necessary math calculations, but the majority of my fellow countrymen dropped out of the course in the very first week. The majority of people who passed the sniper course were from Russia (mostly from Caucasus), where the average education is better. All of our instructors were real professionals—Uzbeks with years of experience in Afghanistan and Waziristan, so the training was superb.²

¹ According to fighters, the biggest technical expertise need ISIS had was helicopter pilots. ISIS fighters had captured helicopters from the Iraqi army but were unable to use them.

² A popular joke in training camps went as follows: "If, in Russia, Russians are usually bossing around Central Asians [who work on low-level jobs], in Syria, Central Asians are bossing around Russians."

Armed groups that did not have qualified trainers made agreements with armed foreign groups that did. One former foreign fighter remembers:

When I was with Seifullah al-Shishani's group, we once went to meet with a leader of an FSA [Free Syrian Army] group that, at the time, controlled checkpoints on the border with Turkey. We asked them to allow our weapons into Syria and our wounded to Turkey for treatment. They agreed, but in exchange, they asked us to train one hundred of their members in combat tactics and weapon use.

Knowledge of military strategy was also often something foreign fighters brought with them. Timur Mahauri, a founder of Ajnad al-Kavkaz and probably one of the most experienced foreign fighters in Syria (at least in the very beginning of the conflict), said:³

When we came to Syria in 2012, people had weapons but did not know how to conduct operations. They had no knowledge of strategy or tactics. We were teaching them, showed them how to do ambushes . . . the most basic things. We started taking enemy tanks because, before, local fighters did not have any. They only had old weapons, so often we had to repair them. Slowly we started taking enemy bases, checkpoints and getting better weapons. . . . I was working with a local general who defected from the regime. The fighters knew how to use weapons, so we started working on more sophisticated operations. I was also meeting people in Turkey and Egypt, and arranging weapons shipments.

Money

Foreign fighters were successful fundraisers, soliciting funds from wealthy individuals in their home countries. Foreigners knew how to appeal to the people in their homelands, and as a result, they were trusted, a crucial asset in the uncertainty of the war. For example, knowing the general dislike of

³ An expert in explosives, he took part in the first and second Chechen wars, a conflict in Ossetia, and special operations in Georgia. He also recruited Chechens from Europe to fight in Chechnya. He was accused of killing Chechen leader Shamil Basaev (leader of a guerrilla campaign against Russia) in 2006 and prominent Chechen rebels in Turkey in 2014. He was assassinated in Kiev (Ukraine) soon after the interview.

Putin by their main Russian-speaking audience, al-Nusra, in its fundraising efforts, portrayed itself as a group fighting the Putin regime and supporting people who suffered from Russian airstrikes. Jabhat al-Nusra reminded people that, in addition to Muslims, the group was also protecting local Christians. Even the symbol for their fundraising among Russian-speaking audiences was blue and red on a white background—the colors of the Russian flag. After Russia invaded Ukraine, Russian-language fundraisers tried to exploit Ukrainians’ anti-Russian grievances by claiming to collect money to fight the Russian government that was helping Assad in Syria.

According to a Syrian member of Jabhat al-Nusra, “Foreigners are able to get funding easier than us Syrians. Because they have relatives and friends outside, their mission is easier.” Another local Jabhat al-Nusra member added, “When the Saudis started doing funding campaigns on social media and with their relatives, we started getting a lot more funding from Saudi Arabia.”

Also, foreign fighters themselves were often wealthier than their local brothers-in-arms and brought their own money with them. This allowed them to rely less on the group (at least for essentials such as food) and meant they were less prone to looting.

In the beginning of the war, local weapons dealers were showing up at foreign fighters’ bases offering them different kinds of weapons.⁴ Because they spent more money shopping, foreign fighters sometimes improved the groups’ relations with local communities. According to one Syrian member of Jabhat al-Nusra, “Civilians and shopkeepers were happy with foreigners because they bought more and paid more.” One ISIS foreign fighter recalled how they were received in Tabqa, where he was stationed: “Shopkeepers loved us. We bought the most expensive foods, including Turkish ice cream, foreign chocolate, and energy drinks. We spent so much money!”

Dedication and Loyalty

Foreign fighters were more dedicated than local ones. Because they had self-selected into the conflict and many had to overcome major hurdles just

⁴ In 2013, an AK47 cost up to \$2,000 in Syria, while in Iraq it was possible to buy one for \$700. Weapons dealers were buying used weapons in Iraq (left there after the U/S/ invasion) and reselling them to foreign fighters in Syria. Later in the war, foreign group leaders learned about this price difference and went to Iraq themselves to buy weapons.

to reach the battlefield, they were extremely dedicated to their goals. Abu Salman Belorusi, who was training armed groups in Idlib, said, “Foreign fighters are more dedicated in fighting and training because that is what many of them came here for. Locals are more likely to look for shortcuts, make excuses, and, in general, be more busy with other tasks like taking care of extended families.”

They were more likely than local fighters to obey even the most unpopular orders and to stay with their group until the end. Local fighters, at least theoretically, had an opportunity to not follow a group’s rulings because family and tribe members would try to protect them from the consequences of disobedience. Foreign fighters did not have that option.⁵

Also, because foreign fighters often looked physically different than locals, they were easily noticed, so it was harder for them to defect. Also, if arrested, their punishments were more severe than that of local fighters. As a result, they were more likely to participate in dangerous operations and suicide missions. According to one former Jabhat al-Nusra fighter:

[Foreign fighters] were always saying they were in Syria to become martyrs and that they would never think of going back to their countries . . . This actually made them a force to be reckoned with on the frontline. I loved joining a battle when there were lots of foreigners in it. . . . Without them on our side, there would have been less fighting, and the regime would have control over more territory.

Another local al-Nusra fighter agreed with this opinion: “Foreigners are there to die, so having them is actually good because they make the group stronger on the frontline.”

An ISIS foreign fighter commented, “When the FSA had foreign fighters, they sent them to the frontline to die because they were willing to take many more risks [than locals] and were not afraid of anything.” According to several former ISIS foreign fighters, the majority of members in ISIS’s most dangerous assault units were foreigners. When interviewed, they angrily complained that “locals were lazy and did not want to die, so we always had to be on the frontline while locals run away from any potential danger.”

⁵ Some respected sheikhs in a community of foreign fighters advised them to marry local girls so their in-laws would help and protect them if needed.

Propaganda

When foreign fighters took part in the fight, it reassured the local population and potential members of an armed group of the validity of their cause. And since they were the more effective and experienced fighters, their presence also increased the popularity of their armed group with local recruits. Since combat training was important in helping recruits choose a particular group to join, the presence of foreign trainers sent a strong signal about the caliber of training a group provided its recruits.

For that reason, having foreigners inside a group also had a psychological effect on the enemy. The experience and dedication of these fighters caused fear partially because, in most ISIS beheading videos, it was the foreigners who conducted the executions.⁶ Locals from Mosul also confirmed that when ISIS came to their town, they were mostly afraid of foreign fighters. They considered them more brutal in their approach because they are out-groups for foreign fighters and so it was psychologically easier for them to conduct executions. The language barrier also made it nearly impossible for locals to communicate or reason with them.

Foreign Fighters: Cons

Despite all the assets foreign fighters could bring to a group, those assets came at a high cost. Their loyalty was not always altruistic. In some cases, fighters caused more problems than they solved and became a serious liability to the group's overall goals. These issues permeated the group's operational and tactical functions as well as the lives of civilians located in the general vicinities of these fighters.

Operational Problems

Foreign fighters came from many different countries, and most often did not speak Arabic. According to a former foreign fighter who was an emir of a small Uzbek group:

⁶ According to an interviewed fighter, any fighter could have volunteered to behead a prisoner on camera; this position was not competitive.

We had a terrible problem with language. Our position was near Nurudin Zinki group [part of FSA], and the only language on the radio was Arabic. We had no idea what was going on around us. The enemy could have been next door and we would not have known about it. Thank God I found a fourteen-year-old Uzbek kid who used to live in Egypt and spoke fluent Arabic to translate for us. His mom married a foreign fighter and left somewhere, so we immediately took him into our group. He was by far the most important person in our group.

Another foreign fighter with ISIS recalled that he had wanted to move from one unit to another, but because he was the only person who spoke both Uzbek and Arabic, his unit needed him to stay and translate.

Not only were most foreigners unfamiliar with the language, the terrain was very different. For example, the expertise that the Chechen fighters had gained during their insurgency in the snow-covered Caucasus Mountains did not easily translate to urban combat and the sweltering Syrian weather.

Screening Problems

Foreign fighters were also harder for the group to screen. Although they had to be recommended like local fighters did, it was harder to check those who vouched for them. This flaw became particularly dangerous for groups on the terrorist list, such as ISIS and al-Nusra, because it made them more susceptible to spies from foreign intelligence agencies. Basically, in the beginning, groups did not have many options other than to check prospective fighters by throwing them a line in online communication to see if they would bite. One fighter recalled that when he found a contact inside Syria online and started talking to him about joining them, they asked him if he wanted a map with their locations. When he refused this information and said he would find them himself, they started trusting him and agreed to take him.

In addition, when a foreign fighter was already part of the group, the foreign government had greater leverage against him because his family was still in his home country. For example, according to a person who was in the same prison cell with infamous Russian spies who were executed on video

by ISIS, one of them admitted that the Russian government had threatened his family to make him work for them.⁷

Problems with the Local Population

Foreign fighters were often either ignorant of or unconcerned with the local culture. According to one former Jabhat al-Nusra fighter, “Foreigners from the Gulf always were eating with their hands, and it took European fighters and locals from Aleppo and Idlib a long time to accept that.” Local al-Nusra members also complained that foreign fighters spoke in native languages among themselves, so no one else could understand them. This caused friction as, according to foreign fighters, their Arab comrades would always tell them they should speak “the language of Quran.” Also, it is normal in Iraq and Syria for men to hold hands, while it is absolutely unacceptable in Russian society because it is considered gay behavior, basically a very offensive accusation. According to a foreign fighter from the Caucasus, male hand-holding was a source of confusion and dangerous misunderstanding between them and local group members in the beginning.⁸ Foreign fighters sometimes even intentionally looked down on local fighters and civilians. Such behavior sparked conflicts inside a group and damaged relations between a group and the local civilian population.

Destroying Group Cohesion

Fighters from different countries tended to segregate by language and place of origin. Because a foreign fighter needed a recommendation, he usually joined a unit where he already knew people. This further segregated fighters into groups of people who knew each other back in their home

⁷ To avoid that, some foreign fighters staged their own death and sent a photo of it to their family back home. At least in one known case in Russia, this strategy worked, and after an individual sent such a picture back home, law enforcement stopped bothering the family. His wife was even able to fly to Turkey to join her husband in Syria.

⁸ Although hand-holding may sound petty, it was very serious issue to these foreign fighters. During the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, when the Taliban and foreign fighters fought together in Afghanistan and Waziristan, the ranks quickly split because of the pedophilia popular among Taliban members (known as *Bacha bāzi*—sexual relations between older men and younger boys). For many foreign fighters, getting away from that was partially the reason for their move to Syria.

communities and strengthened the bonds among fighters in different units. According to an ISIS foreign fighter from Dagestan, every fighter in his unit recommended relatives and childhood friends. Because those fighters shared similar backgrounds, they could evaluate each other's qualities more effectively and felt more comfortable with each other. Such segregation, however, caused a decrease in the armed groups' overall cohesion and even resulted in internal conflicts between different ethnic subgroups. According to a former Jabhat al-Nusra fighter, "The only drawback of foreign fighters was they had their own communities and way of living. They weren't highly integrated into our society."

This issue was acute even inside the foreign fighter community. An emir of a small Uzbek unit that was part of a bigger Tajik group remembers, "Although I was in charge of twenty people, Tajiks never told me even what operations we were going to participate in. The Tajik leadership was keeping everything to themselves and not sharing with our Uzbek subgroup." In ISIS, situation with ethnic segregation was so bad, that even its military leader, Umar Shishani, in its testament wrote an address to mid level leaders "Do not chose people close to you based on where they came from, but only based on their fear of God and their professional qualities."

Inability to Control

Such closed and cohesive ethnic subgroups sometimes digressed into subordination as they bypassed official group channels and started solving problems and making important decisions on their own. Even worse, some subgroups established a separate unofficial chain of command. As a result, the ethic and language segregation also decreased local leadership's control over those foreign subgroups, but it depended on how those groups handled them.

Strategy

Foreign fighters' motives for joining the conflict differed from those of local fighters. These discrepancies caused major political and strategic disagreements between local and foreign fighters. Foreign fighters who joined for power and fame would advocate for the most dangerous

operations despite the risk of unnecessary casualties or depletion of group resources. Foreign fighters who joined for monetary benefit would try to take part in operations with a greater looting opportunity. A foreign fighter with grievances against his home country would be more likely to advocate for an operation there, again wasting resources and even causing the group strategic and political damage.

A similar problem existed in truce situations. Since foreign fighters were often more dedicated to fighting, they were more likely to oppose any other interaction with the enemy, even if it was beneficial for their group. According to a former local Jabhat al-Nusra fighter, “People from the Gulf were always demanding new military operations and were absolutely against any deals with the regime. They were actually angry when they heard about a deal to bring electricity to the Idlib Province through regime territory.”

Even if both foreign and local fighters had similar goals when they joined, the different circumstances of their combat participation led them to make different combat strategy decisions. For example, since it was harder for a foreign fighter to hide, he would be more interested in controlling territory and more conventional warfare, while local fighters were more likely to consider insurgency operations. If arrested, a local fighter had a higher chance of survival (and a shorter prison sentence) than a foreign one, so foreign fighters were more suspicious of locals turning into spies or being less reliable in combat. And since the international community was less likely to make agreements with foreign fighters, these fighters were more likely to advocate fighting until the end.

Group Policies Toward Foreign Fighters

Considering the disadvantages of foreign fighters, should the rebel groups have recruited them? There is no right answer to this question; they were damned if they did and damned if they didn't. Foreign fighters were a major asset to the group, giving them a significant advantage over other armed groups in the same rebel bloc, and even over the enemy. At the same time, the potential downside of foreign fighters was very real, and it could be difficult for a group to mitigate the fallout. For groups who recruited foreign fighters but did not have the capacity to manage them, their presence was counterproductive. Thus, for armed groups, the question of whether to take foreign fighters was essentially a cost–benefit calculation. Groups

were basically calculating their risk tolerance and whether it was worth it to spend resources managing foreign fighters in exchange for the benefits they had to offer.⁹

As mentioned before, foreign fighters in Syria were mostly divided between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra and its affiliates. The two groups' policies toward foreign fighters were different. ISIS actively persuaded all potential foreign fighters to join them, even though they had no clear human resource policies for recruitment or management. This ultimately caused more trouble than benefit. Jabhat al-Nusra, on the other hand, had a different strategy: its leadership strove to reap the most benefit from foreign fighters while carefully minimizing negative externalities.

Recruitment

When both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra were forming full-scale military organizations, they were competing for foreign groups already fighting in the country. Those group members were the most dedicated and, as a result, were very desirable to both armed groups. Those people had come to Syria when there were no benefits involved and no organized groups, thus signaling their extreme dedication to the nonmaterial goal of the war. Because both groups' leaders understood the main reasons those fighters came to Syria, they built their propaganda around it.

The first issue was physical safety, in particular that of fighters' families. In Chapter 5, I mentioned the rumors that were circulated in foreign fighters' groups about rape and imprisonment of wives of foreign fighters by local armed groups. Years after the event, many foreign fighters in Syria realized that those rumors were probably not true but instead had been spread by ISIS to scare foreign fighters and to portray ISIS as the only group in Syria able to protect their families. In an attempt to stop those rumors, an official statement from Jabhat al-Nusra relayed that they had even done an investigation and had even visited prisons where those women were allegedly held but found nothing and no victims or witnesses they were able to talk to. But it was too late—the rumor had already done its job.

⁹ It is also important to mention that some foreign ethnic groups, such as the Turkistan Islamic Party (Uyghur group) took the opposite tack and would not admit locals.

Second were material benefits. Although it was known that ISIS was paying significantly better, it was not crucially important for those fighters (at the time) because they were more interested in the nonmaterial goal of the war. So ISIS took a different road and spread rumors that Jabhat al-Nusra was not fair in post-battle loot distribution. In particular, according to fighters for Umar Shishani (then a leader of Jaish Muhajireen wa Ansar and later a military leader with ISIS), after the battle for the Sheich Suleiman military base, he accused al-Nusra of not sharing loot with his group, although they had participated in the battle jointly. According to fighters, there was very expensive loot to divide,¹⁰ and fighters were expecting a minimum of \$3,000 per person. They each got only \$300. This event was further used by Abu Jihad (one of the top Russian-speaking people in ISIS) in his pro-ISIS speeches. After the fact, many foreign fighters believe Umar Shishani was the one who discriminated against his own fighters. But based on the information fighters had at that time, they blamed al-Nusra and started favoring ISIS (then called the Islamic State of Iraq). Also, according to fighters at that time, they did not feel comfortable asking questions because they were not in Syria, first and foremost, because of money, and felt that thinking about money at that moment was not ethically correct.

Third, the groups appealed to the foreign fighters' desire for prestige. For the majority of foreign fighters, it was very important to be in the group representing al-Qaeda in Syria. Many foreign fighters claimed they grew up learning about al-Qaeda's successful military operations and wanted to be a part of the organization. Also for many, it was an additional reassurance that they were fighting in a real jihad. But the question was: Which group represented al-Qaeda in Syria, ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra? According to fighters, this confusion was the reason Al Joulani (a leader of al-Nusra) took a risk and made al-Nusra's allegiance to al-Qaeda public despite the ensuing political and financial problems. "There were statements after statements about affiliations with Al Qaeda coming from all kind of sheikhs; it was all over internet groups and chats," commented a former foreign fighter. However, ISIS was also trying very hard to claim that it was the "true" al-Qaeda affiliate, going as far as naming military bases after top al-Qaeda leaders (such as a military camp in Mosul named after Abu Musab al-Zarqawi). Despite that, ISIS eventually lost this information battle to al-Nusra.

¹⁰ According to some fighters who participated in this operation, there were large quantities of very expensive explosives on this base that could have been sold internationally.

Finally, they both used religion. Both groups portrayed themselves as religious, complete with a shura council and sharia courts. According to one former foreign fighter, when he was choosing between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, this was a major selling point:

When I went to an ISIS base, there was a jail, but instead of metal bars and a concrete floor, there was a carpet, and the inmates were eating very good food. I was very surprised, but they explained to me that those people did not have their sentence yet, so according to Islam they should be treated as if they were innocent, like guests.

Despite that, there was a major difference between the two groups in terms of using religion to recruit foreign fighters. While ISIS claimed that its main goal was building a caliphate and was accepting anyone (no matter their understanding of the ideology), Jabhat al-Nusra was clear that its main goal was defeating Assad, and by doing so it was intentionally discouraging religious radicals from joining (more about the consequences of this difference in Chapters 7 and 8).

After the most dedicated foreign fighters in Syria at the time were divided between the two groups, differences in their foreign recruitment policies began to increase.

Although ISIS, in some of its promotional videos, specifically called for doctors and engineers to join,¹¹ the group accepted anyone able and willing, regardless of what they could contribute to the organization. According to the *Book of Jihad*, a book popular among Russian-speaking ISIS fighters, that only children, the mentally disabled, women, and the infirm should be exempt from fighting in jihad. As a result, ISIS often failed to derive the main benefit of having foreign fighters—their expertise—and instead spent a lot of its limited resources on training foreign recruits.

In its Western-style recruitment videos, ISIS also promised material benefits to potential recruits. For example, one ISIS supporter who promoted the group on internet radio said, “If you come to Syria and want to start a business, ISIS will give you startup capital. And if you want to

¹¹ It is important to note that in the very beginning of the conflict, groups were interested only in military experts, not doctors or engineers. Interviewed foreign fighters with medical and technical, university-level educations said that no group used their knowledge and expertise in the first year of conflict.

work in a government institution, salaries are also good.” This recruitment strategy worked to attract foreigners, but only those interested in the material benefits being offered. According to a former local ISIS member, many people who joined for money “would have converted to Christianity if it paid well.” Those members were less likely to take necessary combat risks, and more likely to defect to the highest bidder.

To keep profit-driven fighters under control, the group had to constantly satisfy growing demands for power and immediate benefits, and those demands increased proportionally with the hardship and dangers fighters exposed themselves to. Also, much like civilian expatriate workers, foreign fighters demanded many more benefits than their local counterparts did. In Mosul, ISIS foreign fighters were paid significantly more than their local colleagues. In addition, they were given the best houses, cars, and furniture. Foreigners were the first into the houses of those arrested and thus the first to go through and loot any valuables. According to local civilians, foreign ISIS members did not buy anything from local stores because they got anything they wanted for free from the ISIS looting warehouse. During Ramadan 2015 in Deir Ezzor, a war-torn region whose access to the sea had long been blocked, foreign fighters even went so far as to demand fresh fish for *iftar* (the evening meal with which Muslims end their daily Ramadan fast).

Another money-related issue that was often raised was the distribution of loot. By ISIS rules, assault groups received money equivalent to everything they captured in battle. They would officially get the whole retail price for captured cars and weapons and a fixed amount of money for bigger loot, such as a tank. Some fighters disagreed with this policy and claimed that they should be compensated the whole value of big loot. ISIS leaders replied that if they sold all the weapons, they would have nothing to fight with. Nevertheless, fighters kept blaming Umar Shishani, then military emir of ISIS, for this policy.

Fighters’ demands were not only for salary, housing, weapons, and so on, but also for nonmaterial benefits such as sex, something the majority of foreign fighters were not able to afford in the traditional way. For example, in a hundred-member Tajik group, only one fighter was able to afford to marry according to local Syrian customs; the others simply did not have enough money. He was a professional explosives expert and made his living making explosive belts for fighters. Although his customers did not have to pay, they would often tip him with expensive items like weapons, and once

even a motorcycle. As a result, he was able to afford the \$2,000 *al mahr* (the price demanded by a local father for his daughter).

Because of that, group members demanded that ISIS intervene to satisfy their sexual demands. According to local civilians in Mosul, ISIS foreign fighters secured the most beautiful ISIS widows. Even if those women were the daughters of important tribal or ISIS local leaders, they were unable to prevent their marriage if a fighter demanded it. Later in the war, ISIS was also forced to procure female slaves to satisfy the fighters' ever-growing demand for sexual benefits. As a result, ISIS started enslaving Yazidi females in large numbers in 2014, two years after ISIS had begun and the supply of eligible local females had significantly decreased.¹² According to local civilians, foreign fighters also got first choice of sex slaves. These slaves were in addition to the up to four wives fighters were already given.

Over time, different ethnic subgroups of fighters ramped up their competition for material resources and turned on the locals and each other. In July 2015, Albanian and Russian ISIS militants killed three local fighters and wounded several others in the Alace oilfields south of Kirkuk. This was a transit point for an ISIS oil-smuggling operation. Local ISIS leaders reported that the groups had fought over military strategies and that local fighters had refused to follow a foreign officer's orders, but the local civilian population did not believe it. Most locals believed the conflict was over oil money. A civilian who had worked as an oil-tanker driver explained: "One group of Iraqi militants sold oil to drivers going to Syria through Mosul, another group took bribes to let those oil tankers go, and foreign fighters tried to stop tankers for additional checking. They were all fighting over business interests."

This interest in material benefits also significantly reduced ISIS's combat capabilities. In battles at Sinjar and Bashir in Iraq, foreign soldiers persuaded ISIS leadership they were qualified to organize and command the fight, as successfully doing so would help them gain military status and war spoils—including women, cars, houses, and food. ISIS leaders agreed, but both battles were disasters.

The battle in Sinjar was led by French, Russian, and American ISIS fighters. Several days before the battle began, one European ISIS militant

¹² According to one individual who worked to prevent fighters from going to Syria, ISIS was short on women, and they tried to persuade all females (as young as twelve) to marry and widows to remarry as soon as possible. ISIS foreign fighters also confirmed that it was hard to find a wife to marry.

stole \$70,000 and disappeared, leaving the rest of the group with little ammunition, food, or backup forces. The fighters did not last a single day against enemy forces. One local ISIS militant who drove a pickup truck during the battle said, “[The foreign fighters] did not lose Sinjar; they sold Sinjar instead of defending it.”

On April 10, 2016, foreign fighters (Russian, Central Asians, and Chechens) who were supposed to lead the fight in Bashir fled four hours before Peshmerga forces and Hashd al-Shabi (Shia militias) had even entered the village, leaving local fighters with no ammunition, no supplies, and no advanced weapons to face the ground offensive. The battle was a complete failure—dozens of ISIS fighters were killed, and ISIS lost more than four strategic villages near the oil-rich city of Kirkuk.

One would think that the hurdles of getting into Syria would have at least partially screened out recruits who were not interested in the true nonmaterial goal of ISIS. Someone who wanted to join just for a salary or to start a new life might think twice if the costs of joining increased; his cost-benefit calculation would have shifted. But instead of making it more financially difficult and logistically complicated for fortune hunters, ISIS tried to decrease costs by buying tickets to Turkey for foreign recruits, organizing safe houses on the border, and facilitating border crossing, which decreased the costs relative to the benefits, thereby appealing to a greater pool of potentially less dedicated members. According to an ISIS fighter from the Caucasus, before going to Syria, he tried to join an anti-Russian insurgency in the forest in Dagestan, but failed: “We tried to find contacts in the forest to join insurgency there, but at that time, there was active fighting against them, and we were not able to find anyone. As a result, we decided to go to Syria.”

The material aspect was also well illustrated by a famous 2014 audio recording circulated on the internet. When a fighter from the Caucasus was asked why he came to Syria instead of staying home and resisting the Russian government, he very emotionally responded: “They sit there in villages and forests eating leaves while we are doing a five-star jihad here.”

Thus, ISIS significantly impeded its own screening capacity. Also, simple things like making fighters pay for utilities could have helped screen out those who only came for a better life. ISIS did ask members to start paying for their own electricity during the conflict in Tabqa, when funds were getting thin, but initially the caliphate fully subsidized even electricity costs.

By glorifying participation in the war, ISIS also attracted people whose sole aim in coming to Syria was fame. This also had consequences for the

group. One such consequence occurred in 2014, when some members of the Seifullah al-Shishani group questioned their group's participation in a dangerous operation their leader was very dedicated to. It involved taking a prison in Aleppo, and the group members were not sure the operation was strategically important or worth the potential casualties they would incur. Although some fighters thought Seifullah al-Shishani needed this operation to keep his fighters busy, according to others he was partially interested in this high-profile operation for personal promotion. There were rumors of a weapons factory beneath the prison, and capturing it would generate significant monetary gains and military accolades.

Many internal conflicts also stemmed from competition for power within the group. In August 2016, a dispute broke out between groups of local and French ISIS fighters. Both groups wanted to manage an administrative office in the Bab al-Tub area in Mosul, and the ensuing argument culminated in a firefight in a crowded market.

Because in its recruitment campaign ISIS misrepresented the true state of affairs in the group (and did anything possible to prevent the spread of real information, including assassinations), many fighters became disappointed in the group after joining. This often caused these group members to become poor fighters or spies or to sabotage the group from within. In one instance, a Saudi ISIS member destroyed a major tunnel connecting the Al-Shirqat town center with the Shakra area in Iraq. It was an escape route for ISIS militants, but he collapsed it after passing through it himself.

In contrast, Jabhat al-Nusra was more open about its internal state of affairs and the situation on the battlefield, and there were no known cases of former fighters who talked negatively about the group being targeted for assassination. According to Abu Mansour, "Al-Nusra was much more honest than ISIS about what it was doing and what its goals were."

As a result of its indiscriminate recruitment, ISIS imported fighters who brought their national identities with them. Although foreign fighters allegedly fighting for the caliphate all claimed to have the same identity—Muslim—many still clung to their native roots. This even manifested itself in the *noms de guerre* (*kunya*, in Arabic) fighters chose for themselves. In particular, their combat surnames¹³ often referred to their place

¹³ The first part of *kunya* in ISIS distinguishes a person as a father. For example, if a fighter's oldest son was named Hasan, the first part of the fighter's name would be Abu Hasan.

of origin, such as al-Almani (Germany), al-Amriki (America), al-Shishani (Chechnya), and al-Fransi (France).¹⁴

Jabhat al-Nusra, on the other hand, preferred to import Arabic-speaking foreign fighters from Arab countries and the Syrian diaspora. The group was able to draw on their expatriate knowledge and experience, and because they shared the same language and worldview, these foreigners were relatively familiar with local traditions and customs. As a result, they made a more effective and cohesive bond with local fighters.

Also, having foreign fighters with foreign grievances had negative strategic implications for ISIS. For example Chechen foreign fighters from Georgia were known for sending money back home for their family and village needs instead of keeping it inside Syria for the needs of Caliphate.¹⁵ These members were more likely to advocate for operations outside of Syria (in their home nations), regardless of whether those operations were in the best interest of the group as a whole. This could even be seen on social media when foreign fighters in Syria advocated for operations overseas instead of contributing to their group's efforts on the ground. For example, in an online propaganda video, a French convert, Abu Mariam, with a deep-seated grievance against Europe, urged viewers to fight against nonbelievers in France.¹⁶ According to the best friend of Umar Shishani, military leader of ISIS, he always cared deeply about his home region and it was the main reason for him switched to ISIS, which promised to take control of Caucuses. Umar Shishani even ended his testament, he wrote several day before his death, with "I ask you, Leader of the Faithful [Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi], do not forget Caucuses."

Jabhat al-Nusra, on the other hand, strove to only accept foreigners who shared the same grievances as the group's leaders and local fighters. There were many cases when the group turned away prospective foreign fighters who had already arrived at the Syrian border. This reduced the number

¹⁴ One would expect that their names would reference the history of Islam. The group of immigrants who traveled with the Prophet Muhammed from Mecca to Medina were called Muhajireen (emigrants), whereas the people of Medina were known as Ansar (supporters). Thus the name al-Ansari would indicate a local fighter and al-Muhajir a foreign one.

¹⁵ In Pankisi Gorge, very economically underdeveloped region of Georgia, there is even a popular belief that it is easy to identify who from the region is fighting in ISIS. Their family houses have brand new green roofs, because they were reconstructed with the money send back from Syria and green is a color of Islam.

¹⁶ Tom Wyke, "Three French ISIS Jihadis Burn Their Passports and Urge Others to 'Poison Non-believers' Food and Run over Them with Your Cars' in Chilling New Propaganda Video," *Daily Mail*, November 19, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2841698/Three-French-ISIS-jihadists-burn-passports-urge-poison-food-run-cars-chilling-new-recruitment-video.html>

of potential conflicts over military strategy. The group's fighters had few grievances against foreign countries and little interest in conducting unnecessary (and potentially costly) external operations. If some group members were to propose major operations abroad, they would be accused of wasting group resources that could be better used in the fight against the main enemy—the Assad regime. Abu Sulayman, a former senior member of Jabhat al-Nusra, in an online interview to *On the Ground News* (an English-language media outlet affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra), harshly criticized and condemned the ISIS attacks in the West on nonmilitary targets: not only were those attacks not advancing the war in Syria, they were, in fact, counterproductive. In one of his speeches, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (an initial leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq) called *mujahideen* in Syria to attack Israel, and Jabhat al-Nusra, in its semi-official publication, openly accused him of not being competent because “it is a ridiculous proposal to make, to open a new major front while brothers are busy fighting in Syria.”

Although Jabhat al-Nusra also accepted foreign fighters for suicide operations, the leaders were more careful in their selection than ISIS was. Jabhat al-Nusra not only actively sought out foreign recruits and helped them come to Syria, but the group was fastidious in whom they took on as equal members of the group, such as people who had been observed in combat or who had particular skills. Speaking about who should join the jihad in Syria, Abu Sulayman said, “Anyone who was able and useful [to the cause] should pick up and come . . . like a doctor with a particular specialty. . . . As far as emigrating, when you bring your family and kids to establish some kind of home here, I do not advocate that. I do not think it is beneficial to anyone.” With these strategies, Jabhat al-Nusra tried to make sure that only the most useful foreign fighters available were imported.

Retention

In terms of fighter management, and especially foreign fighter management, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS also had very different approaches. ISIS was very centralized, with a fairly unified policy toward all its members. ISIS policy was to integrate all fighters under one command. Jabhat al-Nusra, on the other hand, worked toward the opposite, allowing, and even encouraging, decentralization. A group of foreign fighters could be a Jabhat al-Nusra affiliate, operating as a separate group (with its own leadership, management,

funding, and internal rules), and only participate with al-Nusra in military operations. When an operation was to take place, all the affiliate rebel groups were invited to an operation room to discuss details: who would participate in what capacity, who would man which positions, who would be in charge of logistics, who would be in charge of medical support, and so on. At that point, affiliate groups were free to either decline participation or join al-Nusra ranks in the endeavor.

For example, a Uyghur group (Turkistan Islamic Party) not only had its own leadership (Uyghur with Waziristan experience), religious leaders, and independent budget but also an exclusive training camp.¹⁷ According to a former foreign fighter with this group, “Our main goal was to train before going back to China, but to get fighting experience, we participated in operations under al-Nusra command, but we had our own equipment and supplies. We would rotate who would go on those operations, so that everyone could practice.”

As with Jabhat al-Nusra, various ethnic groups within ISIS tended to segregate into subgroups based on language, country of origin, and even family relations. Chechens were the most infamous for sticking together (in ISIS). One former ISIS foreign fighter (and bodyguard of ISIS Chechen leader Seifullah al-Shishani) commented, “If you looked at the close contacts of Abu Omar al-Shishani [another Chechen ISIS leader], all of them were Chechen. Out of his twenty-five guards, only four were not Chechens.” This issue of Chechen kinship became so pervasive that even other Russian-speaking fighters complained to ISIS leadership. Even some Chechens were annoyed by it. For example, when one Chechen got an important position in one of the units and started inviting his co-ethnics for important positions, one person he invited complained to his friend that he did “not want to participate in this Chechen Mafia like back home” and stayed in the Uzbek unit.

Sometimes ethnic groups carried their biases against other groups into their personal lives. According to a civilian from Mosul who lived near ISIS foreign fighters, French-speaking ISIS members refused to interact with Russian-speaking ones, and their children even played separately on the streets.

¹⁷ This group was also very selective in whom they were taking. They had almost no non-Uyghurs (with the exception of a few Uzbeks and Turks) and did not accept any locals who wanted to switch to the group. Those who left the group were not allowed to come back.

Foreign fighters also brought their ethnic stereotypes with them. Many foreign fighters from North African countries like Tunisia and Algeria preferred to be called (second part of *kunya*) by the language they spoke—al-Faransi—to distinguish themselves from other Arabs whose first language was Arabic. A former ISIS member from Dagestan recalled how fighters from Chechnya looked down on him, a reflection of interethnic dynamics in their shared home country of Russia. Fighters from Central Asia disliked Uzbeks, considering them sneaky and untrustworthy. Fighters from Saudi Arabia often looked down on other Arabs. Some Kosovars also chose to be called al-Albani instead of al-Kosovi, mirroring deep identity divisions back in their home region.¹⁸ Dark-skinned fighters were made fun of by their light-skinned comrades. For example, a former foreign fighter from Central Asia remembered people making fun of a fighter from Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi fighter's *kunya* was Abu Saif, but Central Asian fighters called him Saifudin, a Central Asian-sounding modification of his *kunya*. Also, this Bangladeshi fighter's goal in coming to Syria was to reach Damascus, so his comrades would often speak their Russian and Uzbek languages in front of him and randomly add the word "Damascus," just to drive him crazy trying to guess what they were talking about.

These bad jokes were nothing, though, when compared with the cruelty that also might arise. Once, when once someone in their group was singing in a strange language (which was Bengali, his native language), one of the other fighters said he had a *Jinn* (a demon) and should be treated. So, in addition to reading Quran to him (a usual treatment for *Jinn* in Islam), the man was severely beaten by his group mates.

The most notorious strategic consequence of such attitudes among foreign fighters was the split between Umar Shishani and Seifullah al-Shishani (and the consequent split of their group) in the very beginning of the war. Although their group had more Uzbeks than Chechens, the group leaders were Chechens, and often Chechens look down on people from Central Asia and consider them to be of a lower class. Once a truck with weapons arrived on the base, and Umar Shishani ordered Uzbeks to unload it. The Uzbeks and Seifullah al-Shishani disagreed with the order, asking why it

¹⁸ Because of the positive stereotype about Chechen fighters, some non-Chechen fighters would introduce themselves as Chechens. According to one Chechen fighter in a group affiliated with al-Nusra, "I asked in a groups if they have Chechens. They confirmed. I went there. There are every one—Kazakhs, Uyghurs, but no Chechens. I asked, "Why did you say you guys were Chechens?" They said that they were told to introduce themselves as Chechens coming to Syria to be treated better."

was only the Uzbeks who were chosen to do this dirty job. According to an eyewitness, Umar Shishani replied, “When you were in Russia you did not complain about following the orders of *kafirs* [nonbelievers] when they told you to do a dirty job, so why are you complaining now?” This answer aggravated both the Uzbeks and Seifullah al-Shishani, and they left to form their own group under the leadership of Seifullah al-Shishani.

Over time, these attitudes increased the power of particular units and spurred conflict between ethnic subgroups. ISIS tried to solve this issue by mixing groups up. If an incoming group had its own clear rules, ISIS would welcome them but then would try to kill the leader and shuffle the rest of the group. In 2015, ISIS decided to break apart longstanding ethnic groups already inside the group. Between eight hundred and a thousand Russian-speaking fighters were invited to a big meeting hall in Menagh airport (near Azaz, Syria) and told that all the groups would be mixed; no one could continue fighting with his old unit. The purpose was clear: “They wanted to make sure we would not have one opinion per group,” explained a former ISIS foreign fighter from Central Asia. “In the new groups, there would be people who agreed with some things and people who disagreed, so everything would be debated inside the unit, and the units would not be a cohesive force.” As punishment, fighters who voiced their disagreement with the change were sent to a training camp despite their extensive combat experience.

Jabhat al-Nusra, on the other hand, did not forcibly centralize and integrate its foreign fighters. As mentioned before, they allowed such groups to gain and retain autonomy and become affiliates. According to a local former Jabhat al-Nusra fighter, “Sometimes ethnic groups decided to create their own way of living and moved to areas within Jabal al-Zawiya in Idlib.” Such groups included Turkmen, Uyghurs, and a Chechen group, Ajud al-Kavkaz. This approach to ethnic groups helped Jabhat al-Nusra enjoy maximum benefits from foreign fighters—knowledge, dedication, access to money, and use for propaganda purposes—while mitigating several major foreign-fighter issues.

Expenses

Since affiliate groups were not part of Jabhat al-Nusra, they had separate budgets and raised funds from their home communities. For example,

Ajnad al-Kavkaz was funded by a Chechen community in Europe while the Uyghur group (in addition to outside finding) relied on money that its members, who had sold everything in their home country, donated to the group. Moreover, because groups had independent leadership, they were able to obtain funding from different sources that political disagreements between them would otherwise have precluded, such as different Gulf countries. At the same time, since those groups were fighting for the same goal, funds were still going toward fighting Assad under Jabhat al-Nusra command. Of course, a Jabhat al-Nusra affiliate could ask Jabhat al-Nusra for material help in preparing for an operation, such as buying ammunition, but al-Nusra was free to decline any such request.

Civilians

Many ISIS foreign fighters looked down on local civilians and even their local brothers-in-arms, which often caused problems. In early 2015, three Russian-speaking foreign fighters went to a restaurant in Mosul. According to a local eyewitness, the owner gave them a significant discount, but because the foreign fighters did not speak Arabic, they misunderstood and thought the owner was trying to cheat them. What started as a petty dispute over a \$5 discount exploded when foreign fighters brought over other foreign fighters to beat up the owner. To protect himself, the owner brought his own friends, local ISIS fighters. By the time an interpreter finally arrived, both groups were ready to open fire on each other. ISIS tried to minimize these kinds of incidents, but these were very real conflicts that were not always solved peacefully.

By March 2016, the situation between foreign fighters and the civilian population had reached such a disastrous level that one Russian-speaking foreign fighter published an open letter to other Russian-speaking foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. It was circulated on social media avenues popular among fighters:

What are you doing, Russian-speaking *muhajireen* [immigrants] in Sham [Syria]? Some brothers think the Syrian people deserve what is happening to them because they are sinners. They smoke, shave their beards, and their women wear high heels. Also those brothers call locals traitors, saying that they would betray us tomorrow, and many of them have already run to

Turkey and Europe. But I am asking you, who dares to say those words about Syrians? Who do you think you are? . . .

When I was in the group of Umar Shishani, I witnessed how our brothers were going to the bazaar and pulling cigarettes out of the mouth of old local men, telling them *Ausu biAllah*. Could you imagine any Arabs from Khattab's [a Saudi military leader in the Chechen wars] group doing something like that in Chechnya even once? If that had happened, all Arabs would have been kicked out of Chechnya. Yet when that happens in Syria, Syrians do not even start an argument with *muhajees* . . .

Until now, the Syrian people have had to tolerate such behavior of *muhajees* because if a local says something about their behavior, *muhajees* immediately pull their weapon and threaten them. How is that different from the behavior of any dictator? You left home because of Kadirov [president of Chechnya], Karimov [president of Uzbekistan], and so on. What for? To become dictators to people in Sham yourself? . . .

Brothers who criticize sisters—for wearing heels, decorating themselves, using perfume, and even coloring their eyes with *surma* [kohl, traditional Middle Eastern mascara]—regularly go to the bazaar to show off in front of those sisters. . . . There is no problem with a guy wanting to look good, but why go to the bazaar several times a day looking like that and then criticize locals for doing the same thing? . . . In addition, those same brothers spend all their free time talking to girls online. Think about your own behavior before looking at others. . . .

Also, it is important to mention our brothers' style of driving. On the road, they behave like Kadirovci [members of President Kadirov's army] in Chechnya, speeding on narrow streets and scaring the locals walking there. Brothers, it is important to remember that behavior on the road is different here, and a pedestrian should not have to run away from your car. Instead, a driver should respect pedestrians. . . .

This attitude was confirmed by locals who frequently interacted with foreign fighters. According to an interviewed doctor in Deir Ezzor,

I treated foreign fighters who were so annoying and childish. They were sure that we existed for the sole purpose of serving their needs. They wanted us to stop working on everyone else and just treat them. They used to say, "The *mujahideen* are here for you, and you should treat them better so they can keep defending you." They were very annoying. The others

were somehow nicer, but still there was no respect. Once a foreign fighter got very angry with me because I did not treat him first in the hospital, and he started fighting me. I called the Muhajireen Committee in the city, and told them that if they wanted me to stay and continue working, they'd have to control the children they were recruiting.

The difference in relations with locals often also depended on a fighter's nationality because it often correlated with his purpose for coming to Syria in the first place. The doctor continued:

I have seen so many nationalities, and I can say that some of these foreigners [especially the non-Arab ones] were nice to the people and used to try to speak in Arabic to practice the language, and were always smiling. Tunisians, Yemenis, and Saudis, on the other hand, were so mean and harsh on people. They used to enforce the rules by [threatening with] weapons, and if you didn't listen, they would arrest you. They didn't discuss anything, while the non-Arabs often initiated discussions.

With time, such disrespect toward the local population led to the increasing distrust between locals and foreigners. Foreign fighters realized that their behavior led to increasing grievances among the locals and that they might seek revenge. One former ISIS foreign fighter told the following story:

Me and two other Russian-speaking foreign fighters were driving from the Sinjar frontline to Tal Afar [in Iraq]. Halfway to the base, our driver lost control of the car and the car flipped several times. I flew out of the car through a front window, broke one hand, injured my back, had a head concussion, and lost my glasses. My comrades were less fortunate. They had even more injuries. Soon a car passed by the crash scene with an old local man and his wife inside. They stopped and started helping us. We got into their car, and I got terrified. I could not see without glasses, had no idea where we are at, and could not operate my weapon because my hand was broken, so they could be driving us anywhere. I was thinking to myself, "What will they do, kill us somewhere near the road or drive us to the PKK [Kurdish armed group] positions?" When they actually did not kill us, but instead drove us to the ISIS hospital, I was so happy. I was almost crying while kissing and hugging the old man.

This problem reached its peak in relation to hospitals, where mostly local civilians worked. Foreign fighters were scared because being in the hands of locals put them in a very vulnerable position.¹⁹ Stories circulated among foreign fighters that sometimes even if a fighter was only slightly wounded in the leg, a local doctor would amputate it or make treatment much more painful than it needed to be. One interviewed former fighter offered stories from his experience. When he was wounded in the leg with shrapnel, a local doctor just stitched the wound without taking the shrapnel out. The fighter said:

I was sure that it would get infected. I was lucky it did not, and two years later, when I finally decided to see another doctor about it, he said that it was strange that I was still alive. When I finally had a surgery to remove this shrapnel, for some unknown reason, the doctors gave me an epidural anesthesia to make a tiny cut on the lower part of my leg (bone was not damaged),²⁰ which was very painful, and as I later learned, very dangerous. In fact, for several weeks after the surgery, because of this anesthesia, I felt very sick and had unbearable headaches.

He explained why he had the surgery: “I usually would have never agreed on any such procedure in an ISIS hospital, but by that time I knew I was leaving, and any metal in my body would have triggered the airport metal detector, so I had to take a risk.”

Wives of foreign fighters, on the other side, often complained that the local doctors did not give them enough anesthesia during childbirth.

Their worries were not without cause. According to a local doctor working in Deir Ezzor,

Sometimes we would get drug-addict fighters who were faking pain to pressure us into giving them heavy painkillers like Tramadol. By ISIS rules, we have to report such cases to the organization. Usually the medical staff would hide it if the fighter was local but report it if a fighter was a foreigner. It was their way of killing the organization from within.

¹⁹ One interviewed local surgeon who worked in Mosul under ISIS commented that he did not think foreigners who had claimed to be doctors and were assigned to work next to him had any medical training. He thought they were trying to avoid being sent to the frontline.

²⁰ I saw the scar, and it is no more than 3 centimeters.

While Jabhat al-Nusra affiliates also had similar problems with foreign fighters, they were less severe. The group's decentralized system prevented foreign fighters from being able to hide among a bigger group. They fought within their own groups and had to answer for any disagreements with civilians or other groups on their own. In general, the relatively small foreign Jabhat al-Nusra affiliates avoided conflicts between rebel blocs, which bolstered their positive reputation within local communities. In fact, according to one local Jabhat al-Nusra fighter, some civilians liked al-Nusra foreign fighters more than al-Nusra local fighters. Civilians said foreigners who taught or studied sharia in the mosques were always nice and tried to be good. According to this same fighter, groups affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra were also stricter than ISIS units when it came to looting civilians' property, ordinarily not allowing their members to do so.

Because Jabhat al-Nusra had always been concerned about potential friction between foreigners and locals, the group leaders discouraged its affiliated foreigners from assuming public roles in local religious-police units and other enforcement bodies.²¹ Some Jabhat al-Nusra affiliate groups went even further, moving away from town centers to remote, less inhabited places, and leaving local group members to work with host communities. ISIS foreign fighters, however, actively worked in the police force (*Hisba*) and administrative bodies, which further exacerbated the problems between civilians and foreign fighters. Although ISIS leaders learned from their mistakes and started segregating foreign fighters from the local population, they began too late. By 2016, foreign fighters were even housed in rural villages in Iraq to minimize their interactions with locals, but by then, they were hated by local civilians and fighters alike.

Group Cohesion

Conflict between ISIS foreign fighters and civilians also affected internal group dynamics. According to a Syrian former member of ISIS, "ISIS fighters—especially the foreigners—dealt with local people as if they were the lowest possible class. I hated it . . . and I hated that local people hated me because I was with ISIS." Civilians recounted how, when a dispute between

²¹ Yasir Abbas, "Another 'State' of Hate: Al-Nusra's Quest to Establish an Islamic Emirate in the Levant," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 20 (2016): 52–53.

foreign and local fighters actually reached the Islamic State's courts, foreign fighters pressured judges to hand down harsh sentences (like the death penalty) to local fighters they disagreed with. ISIS foreign fighters were in a position to do so because they had power within the organization, and a monopoly on violence in its territory.

In Jabhat al-Nusra, problems between foreigners and locals members were also common. For example, local fighters sparked arguments over their belief that foreign fighters were unjustly paid more.²² Another often-mentioned dispute was hierarchy within the organization. As one example, before the death of one of the most important Saudi leaders in al-Nusra, few Saudis occupied positions of power. But after his death, Saudis asked for and were given more powerful positions, such as military roles. Egyptians and Tunisians, however, were given more administrative roles like taking care of logistics, operations, and finances. This disparity made Europeans angry, so they transitioned toward such areas as media, communications, and relations with other groups.

Despite these issues, Jabhat al-Nusra still suffered less acutely from such problems than ISIS did, because if ethnic groups could not bring themselves to agree with the group, they had the option of becoming semi-autonomous and implementing their own management structure. It still was considered a problem by local fighters, but a minor one compared to the one in ISIS ranks. According to a local former al-Nusra fighter, "Those ethnic groups were sometimes annoying because it is hard for anyone to get close to them." Another local fighter added, "My problem with foreign fighters was their lack of trust in us. We did not interact a lot and when we are all fighting, they stick to their ethnic groups in fear of betrayal from us." At the same time, foreign fighters voiced similar concerns that they were afraid local fighters would betray them in battle.

Control

Every armed group wants cohesive units that function smoothly as one entity, but excessive cohesion at the unit level could also lead to subordination. ISIS, afraid of internal conflicts, tried to diversify existing units. But instead of avoiding subordination, that action incensed it, decreasing the overall

²² According to local Jabhat al-Nusra fighters, sometimes those accusations were not true, because most foreigners came with their own money and, generally speaking, were wealthier.

effectiveness of the group. One foreign fighter (and part of the most dangerous ISIS assault unit) was furious during the Menagh airport meeting when the units were forced to ethnically integrate: “We fought side by side for a year now, and we were friends, and we trusted each other. Then they wanted to send us into combat with people we didn’t know!”

Jabhat al-Nusra, on the other hand, allowed such units to exist. Their groups were divided by ethnicity, so fighters shared the same language, helped each other in combat, and were better able to evaluate each other’s experience and abilities, which generated further trust. And because Jabhat al-Nusra affiliate units were relatively small, none of them posed a danger to central Jabhat al-Nusra authority.

Security

Because it was particularly difficult to screen foreign fighters, it was better for a group to keep them at a distance from the main organization so they did not gain access to sensitive information. By allowing groups to operate semi-autonomously, Jabhat al-Nusra central command granted them access to information about ongoing operations on a need-to-know basis but would withhold more sensitive information about the overall group’s internal structure, weapons supply, foreign relations, and finances.

ISIS, on the other hand, incorporated foreigners into all levels of group leadership, which put the group in serious danger of infiltration. According to one Russian-speaking former ISIS fighter who, in 2015, was in the same cell of an ISIS prison with two individuals accused of spying for Russia (and later executed on video),²³

One of them [Jambulata Mamayev], half-Kazakh, half-Kabardin, was a long-term friend of a senior Russian-speaking group member Abu Jihad, also from Kabardino Balkaria. Abu Jihad invited him to ISIS, but he was working for the FSB, and even helped move a group of people working for the FSB [the principal Russian security agency] into Syria. Some of those people later defected to ISIS and told who recruited them. As a

²³ To scare the local population, alleged spies were killed and their bodies displayed on the main streets of ISIS-controlled territory with a sign, “Because of these people, you are getting shelled” Alleged foreign spies were executed on video, for international consumption.

result, he [Mamayev] was caught by the Amni as soon as he crossed into Syria . . . Abu Jihad was so pissed that he personally tortured him in prison.

Some former members of foreign security did not even hide their ties to their home country security bureaus when joining the group. Another executed person accused of spying for Russia was Sergey Ashimov; according to his cellmate (who was the last person he talked to before the execution), “When he came to Syria, he told Umar Shishani that in the past he had attended an FSB school, but assured him that, at present, he did not have ties to the organization, so Umar Shishani allowed him to stay.”

Infiltration problems were so serious that ISIS leaders became paranoid. For example, a prospective ISIS fighter from Kazakhstan filmed himself crossing into Syria from Turkey to show off on social media. A smuggler noticed it, and he was immediately arrested by ISIS internal security, imprisoned, and later executed—all before he actually even joined the group. ISIS suspected that he was filming the crossing to send to a foreign intelligence agency, according to his cellmate in ISIS prison.

Sometimes such paranoia backfired, and then the group had to use propaganda to reduce “false positives” in spy accusations. For example, in 2015, Gulmurod Khalimov, a high-level Tajiki member of ISIS who had worked for the Tajikistan police and army before joining ISIS, had to record a video to stop the spread of rumors that he was sent to Syria to kill another famous Tajik group member, Furkon Falastin. In the video, they were filmed together, and Gulmurod Khalimov said that Furkon Falastin was his brother. He then reassured the audience that he would kill anyone who would attack ISIS.

Strategy

Because foreign fighters had different expectations about combat outcomes, they put most of their energy toward fulfilling their particular goals and maximizing their utility, sometimes at the expense of the group. ISIS trained a secret group of fighters from the Caucasus whose ultimate goal was to return to Russia and conduct insurgency activities.²⁴ They were training separately in different bases, and it was a very physically hard training, particularly

²⁴ The leader of this group was Chechen Ahmed Chitaev, who was killed in a special operation in Tbilisi (Georgia) on November 21 and 22, 2017.

in explosive devices. One of the members of this group was Seiful-Islam Yevkurov,²⁵ who, at the same time, was a military emir of one of the Russian-speaking ISIS units in Syria. According to his unit mate and close friend, “He really wanted to conduct operations at home,” which most likely reduced his enthusiasm and time dedicated to working on ISIS activities in the Middle East, where his unit was participating. At the same time, when this close friend, who was also from the Caucasus, was asked why he did not join Seiful-Islam, he replied, “I did not want to return to the Caucasus. We had a caliphate and had to work here.” So, in general, the idea of conducting activities abroad raised disagreement between even ISIS foreign fighters.

At the same time, Afnad al-Kavkaz, a Chechen unit affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra, also joined the fight with the sole goal of targeting Russian forces helping the Assad regime. Thus, the group’s true goal was to exact revenge on Russia. According to the unit’s leader, even though they were fighting alongside Jabhat al-Nusra and other Syrian opposition groups, they chose frontlines that would directly pit them against Russians (such as near Latakia) and did not participate in other operations. And because they were the most motivated force for fighting Russians, al-Nusra knew deploying them to those fronts enabled central command to maximize their potential. Similar situations arose among units from the Gulf whose main goal was fighting Iranians. According to a local al-Nusra fighter, “Compared to my French friends, who were mostly involved in the campaigns against the Assad regime, people from the Gulf were always in campaigns where Iranians were involved.”

A former foreign fighter from Central Asia told an anecdote that well illustrates the situation:

On a training base near Aleppo, I met a group of Chechens with strange zip bags around their necks, under their T-shirts. I asked them whether it was the Quran. They started laughing at me and explained it was Russian passports and money. They said that they came only for a short time to train, and that [they] did not care about Syria and were interested only in combat techniques that would be applicable in the Caucasus Mountains against the Russians.

But this did not mean that there were no misunderstandings on this matter in Jabhat al-Nusra. For example, there were disagreements on how

²⁵ He was also a nephew of the head of Ingushetia Republic in Russia.

to allocate resources for fighting different enemies. According to a local former al-Nusra fighter,

I also had a problem with the foreigners' way of dealing with our management of resources. They did not acknowledge the fact that when we fight the regime, we spend lots of bullets and ammunition while they only did so in a fight against Russian forces. As a result, they got angry and complained if we ran out of ammunition and asked them for support. They were always saying that we wasted too many resources.

Politics

Local and foreign fighters had different opinions about group relations to domestic and international actors, so having a decentralized system allowed Jabhat al-Nusra to be more flexible with its political decisions. For example, if Jabhat al-Nusra made a deal with a particular country or even a ceasefire with an enemy, it did not need to take into account the opinions of all foreign fighters (most of whom were usually against any kinds of negotiations because they were in semi-independent groups with their own leadership).

Overall, Jabhat al-Nusra's approach to foreign-fighter management played an important role in not only their combat success, but their success in civilian outreach and politics. While ISIS tried in vain to forcibly integrate their foreign fighters, Jabhat al-Nusra allowed them to be segregated and semi-independent, which proved a much better policy for the group as a whole.

At the same time, it was worth noting that not all local low-level Jabhat al-Nusra fighters agreed with the strategy, and some even criticized leadership for it. For example, when one local Jabhat al-Nusra fighter was asked his ideas on the subject, he replied, "Were I the head commander of Jabhat al-Nusra, I would have spread out foreigners [mainly Saudis] to different brigades and military groups and then made them integrate more into the society of our groups."

Turnover

Jabhat al-Nusra and its affiliates did not impose an absolute ban on foreign fighters quitting and leaving. Jabhat al-Nusra affiliates had their own rules,

but Ajnad al-Kavkaz, as one example, even had a sister group fighting on the frontline in Ukraine (Sheikh Mansur Battalion), and its members could move freely between the two frontlines if they had necessary documents and were not needed in their deployed area. That ensured that only people who were still dedicated to the goal of the war in Syria would stay and fight, while those who lost interest could peacefully leave without having a negative impact on the group's overall effectiveness. On the other side, not all group members agreed with such policies. According to a Russian-speaking group member,

If you could not leave, you are preparing yourself for the possibility of being killed at any moment, and it is good. Fighters who always think about finishing operations as soon as possible to leave to Turkey will not invest in developing relations with local population, will not be careful in preparing bases, and could even recklessly spend group money.

ISIS, on the other hand, forbade anyone to leave after the proclamation of the caliphate. To ensure compliance, ISIS instituted increased surveillance at checkpoints and prohibited fighters from crossing without a phoned confirmation from their emir. They also mined smuggling routes and recruited shepherds in villages near the border to report people searching for escape routes to Turkey. Even vocalizing thoughts of escaping within ISIS became dangerous.

These policies, in conjunction with indiscriminate recruitment and poor management, had terrible consequences for ISIS. Fighters were already discouraged over the disparity between their expectations and on-the-ground realities, and forcing them to stay worsened already seething internal problems; they could potentially engage in sabotage or spying, or even plan a coup (for more details, see the following chapters).

To prevent that from happening, ISIS was forced to increase monitoring of its own members' communication with the outside world (spying) and internally (coordinating with other group members for a coup). Low-level group members were prohibited from having internet access at home. There were Amni members assigned to work at internet cafés, and at any moment, police could have stormed in and checked everyone's phones for the content of their messages.

Although some fighters came for different reasons, in rare cases their motivations lined up nicely with their host organization's aims. For example,

one former ISIS member from Dagestan alleged that Abu Omar al-Shishani became a military emir “due to the enormous casualties he was willing to sustain.” Because of that, some fighters even nicknamed him Abu Meat. Another interviewed former fighter explained how, during an operation near Tabqa, “One fighter experienced in that particular territory offered advice to Abu Omar on tactics and intelligence, but Omar dismissed his advice, saying, ‘We came here to *shaheed* [die as martyrs], so we do not need tactics.’” Although Umar essentially substituted his lack of military experience with a willingness to sustain excessive casualties, the outcome satisfied both the fighters and the group as a whole: fighters went on the suicide missions they were looking for, and the leader was praised for his successful operations and was promoted.

Leaders also had problems controlling group members who came to Syria only to die. According to an interviewed Uzbek emir of a small twenty-member group (affiliated with al-Nusra), “They all considered themselves heroes, and did not want to do anything, including fighting. They just wanted to die and meet their *houris* [virgins].” Their group held a *ribat* [frontline position] far from the base, so there were ten people at a time on the line while the other half were on base. The emir had problems even waking the fighters on base up in the morning to do non-fighting tasks such as cooking and cleaning. “Even if they do that,” he said, “for the rest of the day, they do nothing, and that is how problems start because they all consider themselves heroes who are allowed to do anything they want because they are on jihad.”

To keep them busy, the emir got creative. “I needed to preoccupy them with something during their downtime,” he continued, “so I went to the market, bought a book of Hadith (that I myself did not know anything about), notebooks, and pens, and made them memorize several hadiths per day just to keep them busy.” At one point his group’s top emir came and asked for people to go on an military operation. He himself was wounded, so was not able to go, but he gave the lead emir the ten fighters who were on the base at that time. The operation was a disaster, and of the ten fighters who went, only one returned to the base alive.²⁶ He explained:

²⁶ This defeat resulted from a series of unfortunate events. The members of his Uzbek *group* were on the very frontline, and members of the Tajik *group* were supposed to put explosives under enemy tanks coming toward their positions. But the explosives did not detonate, so the tanks were able to enter the frontlines and kill everyone there. The Chechen group standing behind the line was supposed to cover them with machine-gun fire. The machine gun did not work either, and they did not have another one.

I saw Assad videos of this battle—dead bodies everywhere. I cried so much watching it and seeing bodies of my fighters, but when my other ten fighters came back from the *ribat*, they were so mad at me because I did not send them to this operation. [There was no radio connection to the frontline from their base, so he was not able to tell others about the operation.] According to them, they were tired and bored sitting on a *ribat*, and now mad because they missed such a good opportunity to die.

But in most cases, it was harder for armed groups to facilitate different fighters' goals. For example, many joined to go on suicide missions, which resulted in long waiting lists since the actual tactical demand for such operations (at the beginning) was insignificant. According to one foreign member of an ISIS assault unit, ISIS would often send suicide bombers where there was no need for them just to satisfy a fighter's desire:

Once a group had a suicide mission volunteer detonate a car filled with explosives under a bridge. But there was no enemy near the bridge, and we could have just gone there at night, quietly positioned the explosives, and detonated them remotely. There was absolutely no need for a suicide operation.

Even harder for ISIS was managing its members' orthogonal goals. It was impossible to simultaneously satisfy individuals interested in increasing their personal wealth and power in conjunction with those fighting to live in a fair and just society. While ISIS tried to buy off people interested in immediate monetary benefits, it increased the grievance of people who came to live in a place better than their home countries and vice versa.

ISIS attracted a number of people who had problems with the law in their home countries, and while in ISIS, these people continued to do what they knew best: earn their living dishonestly. For example, one Chechen from Europe was accused of stealing back in his home country and lost a leg in some kind of a bar fight before coming to ISIS. Because of his disability, he was not able to fight, nor did he want to due to the dangers involved, so he started a business trading weapons. According to people who knew him in ISIS, he was free to conduct any transactions as long as he kept track of who bought weapons and regularly reported it to Amni.

In some units, the whole leadership was known to be involved in corruption. In ISIS, there were rumors that in the Haibar unit, the leaders was

stealing money dedicated to hiring local laborers for manual work; basically they had ghost employees. Some of those who were corrupt were not even shy about displaying it. According to one foreign fighter, in 2014, a local emir in Tabqa used his position to obtain a very expensive apartment at a time when the influx of foreigners was creating an acute housing shortage. Many fighters, especially foreigners, were dissatisfied and started openly complaining, particularly when they saw the emir remodeling the apartment to make it even more luxurious. They eventually got the emir evicted from the apartment, which later housed two or three families of ISIS fighters.

Some ISIS foreign fighters who had engaged in petty crimes before coming to Syria continued doing so under ISIS. One foreign fighter from Central Asia who was involved in robbing supermarkets in his home country stole several cars from locals, claiming it was loot from battles. When the car owners came to ISIS demanding the return of their cars, ISIS had to imprison the thief even though he was in an ISIS assault unit.

In Jabhat al-Nusra, similar complaints of corruption were voiced about Seifullah al-Shishani, who lived in a huge house. According to foreign fighters in his unit, while other emirs in the group did not have bodyguards, he had several guarding his house. He also had the best food available. "Of course his fighters were not starving, but the inequality was very visible and annoying," commented one former fighter.

Such corruption and nepotism were even visible in the Yazidi slave market. Some fighters complained that the best (young and beautiful) girls did not even reach the public market and were divided between group leaders. The only females available for purchase were old and useful mostly for housework, according to fighters.

There was a visible disparity between foreigners who came to fight and foreigners who came to start their lives from scratch in what they considered to be a better society. For example, members of an assault unit would complain about coming back into town from the frontline, where they had lost their friends, only to see other group members enjoying their lives. People stayed in large, comfortable houses (abandoned by their owners) and refused to answer any call to arms. "They collected their salary and sat home drinking fruit juices," one former ISIS member from Central Asia explained. "And when the emir called them to go to the frontline, they or their wife were 'sick,' and they'd ask for a deferral." Others complained of

foreign fighters who went to the battlefield only to take pictures and then post them on social media for their friends back home to see.

Finally, there was conflict between religious group members and foreigners who came for other reasons. Religious people became disillusioned with ISIS because it did not live up to their expectation of a utopian Islamic State. These people quickly realized they wanted to leave the group and return to their native countries but most were unable to (more about that in the following chapters).

Although ISIS tried hard to change the goals of the incoming members, this effort did not always work. Instead of fighting, some members started retiring from combat. Some even went to their local ISIS office to return their ISIS-issued weapons and then relocated near the Turkish border, further away from the frontlines. Others, who had their own weapon, sold it to pay for a smuggler.

Those who remained with the group retaliated. ISIS fighters even physically attacked Amni officials. In one case, when a Tunisian foreign fighter suspected his taxi driver was an Amni officer (he had a weapon in the car), the fighter stabbed him with a knife. According to former ISIS prisoners, there were many fighters in prison for attacking Amni members. Inevitably, these attacks led to harsh retaliation from Amni, which exacerbated internal conflict.

Conclusion

These armed groups, which were not supported by major powers, did not have access to technical expertise and major sources of money. Usually, countries with ongoing civil wars have a relatively uneducated populace, so being competitive required groups to source those with the necessary knowledge and experience. And in this time of rapidly increasing combat technology (with drones and chemical weapons programs), they had no other options than to recruit and accommodate foreigners with particular knowledge and experience, and to develop policies to manage them.

But management was no easy task for groups, and very few were able to do so successfully. Although foreign fighters could be a major boon for a group, they could also be more trouble than they were actually worth. Furthermore, armed groups needed full control over them and had to split them up if needed, but that was not always easy to do. So in Syria, while

Table 6.1 Human Resources Policies of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra

	ISIS	Jabhat Al-Nusra
Recruitment	More money offered al-Qaeda brand Indiscriminate recruitment + Misrepresentation of goals	Less money offered al-Qaeda brand Control on individuals goals match with those of the group
Retention	Enforced integration	Enforced segregation
Turnover	None could leave	Anyone could leave
	↓	↓
	Unhappy group members who are forced to stay	Dedicated fighters

Jabhat al-Nusra was able to develop human resource policies that benefited its manpower quality and mitigated the negative externalities of having foreign fighters, ISIS was not able to do so, and this led to major problems for the group (Table 6.1).

Group policies were not always easy for foreign fighters either, particularly in comparison with local fighters. While dissatisfied local fighters could switch to another group or simply demobilize, foreign fighters did not have this option. Few groups accepted foreign fighters who changed groups; worse yet, if a fighter's home country had outlawed his group as a terrorist organization, demobilizing was extremely difficult. In this event, disillusioned foreign fighters were trapped and sometimes became a major problem for the armed group by turning their interests to material benefits, passing information to the enemy, and even sabotaging the group from the inside.

Local militants in Iraq once believed that Western foreign fighters in ISIS were true believers, highly professional, and, above all else, educated. But four years into the war, that image changed, and foreign fighters were seen as thugs, and the only "rational" explanation for their involvement was that they were really working for their own governments. One local civilian explained, "There were many rumors in Hawija that the foreign fighters' flags contained a phosphoric material that sent signals to U.S.-led coalition warplanes. Therefore, the warplanes did not shell them or the bases they worked at."

Handling Ultra-Radicals

Learned Shaykh 'Umar Mahmud Abu 'Umar (may God release him from his captivity) says: "When the jihad is ignited in some place, the Islamic movements will face the problem of raising the prestige of jihad in the view of the bases, especially those whose innate natures have not been completely sullied. Let them engage in jihad, unless the man who is in your organization heeds the instructions and fatwas of sheikhs outside of the group. These types of youth are very dangerous and take away the power and impetus of any movement in any circumstance."

Abu Bakr Naji, *Management of Savagery*

As I mentioned in Chapter 4, ideology is an important way for armed groups to screen and maintain the caliber of their human resources. Adopting strict rules grounded in ideology helps ensure the absence of undedicated people among their ranks. What it cannot do is control the upper bar of dedication, and this, counterintuitively, is a major vulnerability of a group that claims to be ideological. In fact, it is even more dangerous for the group than controlling the lower bar and not letting in undedicated members. Group members who are more radical than the average will cause internal problems since they will not be satisfied with an average level of group ideology. And because, by definition, they are extremely dedicated to their goal, little could stop them in pursuing it, compared to undedicated fighters. During the Syrian war, this issue became a slippery slope that caused a number of serious problems for the groups and the fighters themselves.

For Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), one side effect of using ideology in this way was that it attracted people more interested in the ideology than in the actual goal of the group, which in its case was power. Not only did these fighters enjoy the restrictions put on them by the group, they also put them (and ideology more generally) in front of military and political necessities. Many foreigners who went to Syria were looking for a

utopian Islamic state and were highly disappointed when they found something far less. In addition, because the ideology was vague, it allowed for many different interpretations, so people could not even agree what their utopia looked like. As a consequence, those fighters quickly become disillusioned and took one of two courses of action: either they peacefully retired from combat, or they tried to change the group from within.

This chapter is based on very limited sources. There is almost no research or even journalistic accounts of this ultra-radical sect because they were almost entirely purged from ISIS due to their extreme religious views. Those who survived still operate in deep secrecy. These former ISIS foreign fighters were hiding not only from law enforcement but from other former ISIS members, ISIS internal security, and supporters.

Because of their reticence, I stayed in close contact with specific members for almost two years, visiting them in their safe houses in Eastern Europe and talking to them almost every day by phone and online messengers. This effort paid off, and in addition to interviewing them, I obtained access to their closed Internet groups and communities, where I was able to listen to their discussions and lectures. They also shared books, chats, letters, and even text messages with me. Although the majority of what I relay here is based on the memories and materials they shared with me and so could not be verified independently,¹ it provides a window into the sect's ideological position and their confrontation with ISIS.

Extremism in ISIS

“I could not continue fighting under the ISIS flag. It is not Islamic. A true Islamic flag should only have the first part of *shahada* [“There is no God but Allah’] written on it, not a circle with ‘Muhammad is his messenger’ like ISIS does, or the name of the group, like al-Nusra.” ISIS foreign fighter from Central Asia.

Due to its indiscriminate recruitment, ISIS took on fighters with many different goals. First, six months before declaring a caliphate in 2014, they were trying to increase their numbers by getting as many foreign groups to merge

¹ Two interviewed subjects who had been friends in the same units in ISIS and were hiding in the same country were always interviewed separately. At no point did their information contradict.

with them as possible. They would basically lie to them and say they could keep their ideology and be semi-independent. And second, as shown in previous chapters, because of extensive propaganda, after declaring a caliphate, they also attracted individual fighters lured by different aspects of this propaganda. While some went to Syria truly hoping to live in a utopian Islamic state or to fight and die for religion, others came not knowing much about religion.

Initially, ISIS fighters did not have time to think about religion because they were too busy fighting. But in 2014, when life in the caliphate had stabilized, the situation changed. As one former fighter commented, “I was in Syria for year and a half by then and moved to the town and started a normal life. That is when I got afraid to die. Not when there was active combat, but when I lived peacefully and would hear an aircraft bombing something nearby and you never know where it will hit.”

Fighters became afraid to die without learning about Islam and had difficulties rationalizing why they had been so close to death and survived while many others had not. So they started turning to religion for answers. “In ISIS, I learned about Tawheed [monotheism] for the first time, and that if I died without learning more about religion, I was not going to be a Muslim. So I got scared to die, since I would not be a *shaheed* [a Muslim martyr],” explained one former fighter. Another added, “On Judgment Day, we will have to answer for everything we did in this life, so I needed to follow what was written in Quran. . . . I got terrified when I realized that if I died right then, I would go directly to hell, forever.”

Many fighters who had turned to civilian life used their free time to discuss religion, read religious books, and even hold lectures; others intentionally switched from assault units to positions with more free time. “I lived in Tabqa, but went to Raqqa for books to study Islam,” a former fighter recalled. He had been in an assault unit before 2014 but then switched to guarding a checkpoint with a lax schedule (he worked one day followed by three days at home).

Unfortunately for ISIS, not all of the fighters who wanted to learn about Islam turned to an official ISIS-religious narrative, and the more they studied, the more they questioned ISIS. Some group members turned to the teachings of Sheikh Ahmad al-Hazimi, who believed ignorance was no excuse in Islam; this was in opposition to the ISIS narrative of religion. Al-Hazimi argued that those who excused the ignorant and did not excommunicate a Muslim guilty of heresy are themselves *kafirs* (infidels) and could be targeted and killed like other infidels (a second-level *takfir*).

Basically, if person A is *kafir* and person B did not declare *takfir* on person A, person B was also a *kafir*. The official ISIS narrative, however, rejected this application of *takfir* (declaring someone *kafir*) to Muslims who themselves were not *kafirs* but who refrained from declaring *takfir* on people who are (prohibits second-level *takfir*). Those were so-called excessive *takfiris*.²

Some individuals, so-called chain *takfiris*, went even further in their understanding of *takfir*. Compared to followers of Hazimi, they (often followers of Sheikh Helmi Hashimi) did not put a limit to the chain of *takfir*, saying that if person A is *kafir*, person B did not declare *takfir* on him, and person C did not declare *takfir* on person B for that, person C is also a *kafir*, leading to an endless chain of *takfir* (basically allowing third-level, fourth-level, and so on *takfir*). Members of this sect thought that such chain *takfir* was the only right way to separate Muslims from non-Muslims (*kafirs*). They also declared *takfir* on excessive *takfiris*.³ And although the legitimacy of a chain *takfir* seems like a very narrow theological debate, it had major implications for the group, and could have potentially caused the whole organization to implode.

According to chain *takfiris* in ISIS, the behavior of the local Syrian and Iraqi population made them *kafirs*, and because ISIS ignored that fact, they were also *kafirs*. Such an attitude alienated civilians because being called “non-Muslim” was one of the most offensive accusations in Islam, and within ISIS, it meant a death sentence. What made it the most dangerous was that the logic of this chain *takfir* teaching eventually led to insubordination inside the group and even to the excommunication and targeting of ISIS leadership, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself.

When the caliphate was pronounced, one foreign fighter recalled being in shock. For him, it was a very sad day. “How could it be a caliphate if the local people do not even know how to pray?” he questioned. “There were cigarettes being sold everywhere. What kind of a strange caliphate is that? It was just a regular country.” Although ISIS promised to open schools and teach everyone the basics of Islam, he believed that “it should have been done before announcing a caliphate.” He also complained that civilians did not distinguish between true Muslims and false Muslims, yet ISIS did

² They did not have an official name because they called themselves Muslims and everyone else non-Muslims, but when someone wanted to insult them, they called them *Khawarij*.

³ One of the interviewed former fighters even declared *takfir* on Hilmi Hashimi in 2017, because, according to him, when Hashimi had a problem with Egyptian law, he went to a civilian court, which made him *kafir*.

nothing about it: “When Assad’s forces came, they [civilians] applauded; when the FSA [Free Syrian Army] came, they applauded; and when ISIS came, they welcomed them with flowers.”

Another foreign fighter believed locals should be declared *kafirs* because they used government (non-sharia) courts and participated in elections or talked to women directly instead of through a male guardian, which is prohibited. As he put it, it was not okay “to accept some aspects of sharia and ignore others because they are less convenient.”

Also, according to *takfiris*, because ISIS members ignored this kind of behavior from locals, it made them non-Muslim too. One former fighter explained:

I left my unit because my emir was ignorant and did not follow Sunna [the traditional portion of Muslim law based on Muhammad’s words or acts]. At first, my friends tried to comfort me saying that there are a lot of *kafirs* in ISIS, but Baghdadi is a true Muslim . . . and I really wanted to believe it. But it is impossible that Baghdadi was simply not aware of what was going on [suggesting that Abu Bakr was a *kafir* as well].

Takfiris were openly annoyed by almost all aspects of life in the caliphate that did not live up to their idea of a utopian Islamic state. When one of the interviewed former fighters learned that local women in Iraq preferred to use formula to feed their newborns, he got very irate and sad: “How could they think about the shape of their breasts when it is absolutely clear in Islam that a women should breastfeed until her child turns two years old,” he commented. And the behavior of their fellow group members also made them very angry. “To show off, many fighters were making special ISIS license plates for their cars with an ISIS flag,” one of the former fighters explained. “It is absolutely unacceptable because the ISIS flag has *shahada* and [the] name of Allah written on it, and when it is on the car’s license plate on the bumper, it could get dirty.”

Over time, more and more ISIS fighters became concerned about the religious legitimacy of ISIS. They started rejecting ISIS’s goals of war and power, and instead believed the main goal of the war should be ideology itself. As a result, many fighters refused to participate in combat operations. “ISIS was just manipulating people,” one former fighter commented. “Not only should we not fight alongside them, but we should not even drink tea with them.”

“The purpose of human beings is not war and power, but serving God,” added another former fighter. “We declared *takfir* not to offend people, but to teach them. We only want a good thing. While in this life, they could still change, after Judgment Day, it will be too late . . . you will go to hell forever.”

They understood (and rejected) the way ISIS operationalized religion to serve group goals. One former foreign fighter commented:

When relations between ISIS and the FSA were normalizing [they were not fighting each other that intensely], ISIS rhetoric shifted, and only FSA emirs were *kafirs*, while the FSA soldiers were good Muslims. Instead of separating who followed Islam from who did not, ISIS just called their allies “Muslims” and their enemies “non-Muslims.”

Another former fighter went even further, explaining that “ISIS only took Islamic rites, prayers, some sharia laws, and slavery, but ideologically, they are not Islamic.”

Chain *takfiris* also tried to intervene in ISIS’s military strategy, and their teaching basically prohibited all the most successful ISIS strategies. First, chain *takfiris* were basically against spying. They claimed that it was prohibited to spy on Muslims and to work for non-Muslim civilian institutions, even for the purpose of spying. This logic prohibited the ISIS reliance on an extensive spy web not only on their territory, but also inside enemy forces, such as Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq and rebel groups in Syria. Second, chain *takfiris* claimed that ISIS members, even for strategy purposes, could not wear the enemy uniform to confuse the enemy. According to their teaching, by putting on the flag of someone, a person becomes one of them. So by dressing in an Iraqi uniform, one becomes a member of a different nonreligious group, which is prohibited. This logic put into question popular and very successful ISIS operations of dressing in enemy police and military uniforms and installing fake checkpoints on roads, or going into police stations and killing everyone inside.

Third, some of their ideas went against the need for ISIS propaganda. For example, it was popular in ISIS to publicly rip captured Iraqi flags into strips to symbolize victory over the Iraqi government. But according to chain *takfiris*, it was unacceptable to do so because the Iraqi flag has *Alahu Akbar* (God is Great) written on it, so ripping and cutting the flag and even making it dirty was unacceptable.

And finally, chain *takfiris* were against ISIS reliance on volunteers for suicide missions. Chain *takfiris* believed that if people had studied true Islam, they would have realized how hard it actually was to get into heaven. In an ISIS book, *Book of Jihad* (a copy of which I collected at an ISIS base in Mosul), it is written, “The best deed in front of Allah is jihad, followed by respect to parents and mentioning Allah.” On the other hand, according to one chain *takfiri* former fighter, “In reality, those fighters were not keeping their word; they did bad things and they lied; but they still think they will get to heaven because they were willing to kill themselves. That is not Islam.”

During the interview I took an ISIS side and asked chain *takfiris* how, when following all those restrictions, anyone could win the war against a strong enemy. They replied, “It does not matter that it will be harder, and they will lose more people. It is the only right way to fight.”

ISIS’s use of visual signals of being Muslim also troubled chain *takfiris*. According to one former fighter,

When others see a man with a beard, long hair, and traditional clothes, they think he is Muslim. For me, it does not mean anything. By default, I consider him non-Muslim until he proves otherwise by his deeds. . . . I also want others to consider me a non-Muslim in our first encounter, because that means he could be a Muslim and knows that only after a relatively long interaction is it possible to understand who is Muslim and who is practicing Third Nullifier [precept about chain in declaring *takfir*].⁴

They also rejected much of what ISIS promoted, like *nasheeds* (songs). According to their logic, when foreigners with poor Arabic skills listen to *nasheeds*, they do not understand the words but listen to the rhythm. That would make *nasheed* music, and music is prohibited. Chain *takfiris* also refused to attend mosque during a Friday prayer because they could not pray surrounded by people they considered non-Muslims behind an imam they also considered a disbeliever. If they had to attend mandatory prayers in the mosques, they would later redo their prayers at home.

In addition, they rejected ISIS bureaucracy, without which such a major organization could not have functioned. For example, when one fighter

⁴ Chain *takfiris* interviewed for this book looked like any other member of society. They wore jeans, had short haircuts, and wore no beards. One person even had a tattoo on his hand that he did not remove after becoming religious.

was on the way back to Syria from Iraq, he learned that ISIS's claim of having destroyed the borders between Iraq and Syria was not true, and that crossing still required paperwork. For him, it was more proof that the region was still "more like a normal democracy than a caliphate," his disgust evident in his use of the word *democracy*.

They also disagreed with ISIS about portraying the war in Syria and Iraq as jihad. One former fighter commented: "Some people fight for the land and power, and that's okay, but it is not an Islamic war. It's not jihad . . . and here, in Iraq and Syria, some non-Muslims are simply fighting against other non-Muslims."

Finally, chain *takfir*s dedicated much more time to religion than ISIS wanted them to. In addition to Ramadan, they would fast twice a week, and instead of the normal five times of daily prayer, they prayed seven times.

According to chain *takfir*s, for ISIS members to become Muslims, they not only had to start following all those rules and accept the idea of a chain *takfir*, but they also first had to declare *takfir* on themselves, meaning that they would have to realize that, until the moment they did, they were not Muslims and would have to repent.

The majority of people in this ultra-extremist sect inside ISIS were not locals but foreigners, especially people from Egypt, Tunisia and the former Soviet Union, who had come to Syria to fight and die for what they believed in—Islam.⁵ Interestingly, there were almost no local chain *takfir*s because they were not interested in the religious implications of either side. They simply accepted the caliphate as it was or left.

In time, this sect grew dangerous for ISIS leadership because its members were extremely dedicated to fighting for (their idea of) Islam. Compared to other ISIS members who came for different reasons, members of this sect had braved the dangerous trip to Syria from their home countries to fight against *kafirs* for Islam and potentially die for the cause, so if they believed ISIS leaders were *kafirs*, nothing would stop them from standing up to the organization, even if it meant their lives. According to a chain *takfiri* from Dagestan, "ISIS is the main enemy. The forces ISIS is fighting are not hiding that they are *kafirs*, but the most dangerous people are ones like ISIS who are *kafirs* but pretend to be Muslims."

⁵ According to some non-chain or excessive *takfiri* foreign fighters in Syria, this ideology became popular among people from the former Soviet Union because many of them, before coming to Syria, studied religion in Egypt, where Hazimi was lecturing.

However, disunity among these extremists grew over time as well. This happened the same way the *takfiri* sect had formed in the first place: because ideology—and, in the case of ISIS, Islamism—was very vague; people could interpret it in many ways. Thus, individuals who had come to care about it started reading different books and following different sheikhs, and as a result, had different opinions on the same issues. In this case, opinions diverged on how to be a true Muslim and what an ideal caliphate should look like. Thus, anytime someone identified even a tiny problem that others did not recognize before or a previously ignored restriction in Islam, a “true believer” would accuse others of *kufir* (denial of the truth in the form of articles of faith in Islam) and declare them (and everyone who had not declare *takfir* first) *kafir*. Something as minor as questions on how to shave a beard could become a source of a major religious disagreement within the sect, and the response would be declaring *takfir* on each other.

Despite that, because members of this sect were much more radical than ISIS, had grievance against the group’s leadership, and were willing to sacrifice their lives for their ideas, ISIS was terrified of them, and the group had to act.

Mitigating the Danger on a Low Level

Although the ideas of chain *takfir* existed from the very beginning of the conflict in Syria, regular fighters did not pay much attention to them at first. According to a fighter who later became a chain *takfiri*,

Before coming to Syria, I was interested in the works of Al Albani [a Salafi scholar] who was absolutely against *takfir*. In ISIS, me and thirty to forty other people from my group attended lectures of Sheikh Abu Umar Kuwaiti where he would talk about Al Albani being *kafir*. Although we were in shock, we asked around and learned that Abu Umar Kuwaiti was kicked out from al-Qaeda in Afghanistan for those ideas. At that point I did not care much, so I just stopped attending his lectures altogether.

Others (even if they were favoring chain *takfir* ideas) choosing between different groups decided that ISIS was still closer to their utopian idea of an Islamic state and simply hoped that, with time, ISIS would change its policies on *takfir*. According to one former ISIS foreign fighter, “When

everyone around is trying to kill you because you call people fighting for democracy *kafirs*, the issue of declaring second-level *takfir*—*takfir* on a person who did not declare *takfir*—becomes much less important.”

Later those ideas started to infiltrate the group, both from outside and inside. One fighter remembered that he was contacted by a former ISIS member who was already in Turkey who scared him because he said he would die a non-Muslim, and started explaining chain *takfir* ideology. Others recalled that they learned about it from other fighters in the units.

When asked how they spread those teachings inside the unit, a former fighter explained:

You would think about talking about *takfir* only with people you trust, your personal friends who you were sure did not work for ISIS intelligence. And if you thought that they were interested, you would briefly explain it to them and then give them lectures of prominent chain *takfiri* sheikhs to listen to on the cellphone. Usually it was done inside one’s ethnic group because of both language and trust.

New offensive language also began to be highly in use. Excessive *takfiris* started calling people who did not share their religious views *murjeets*, referring to a historical Islamic sect whose doctrine stated that only God has the authority to judge who is a true Muslim and who is not. They also believe that Muslims committing grave sins would remain Muslim and be eligible for paradise if they remained faithful. This word comes from the Arabic root *irjaa*, which means postponing the acts of belief. On the other side, the name *Khavarij* was used to offend excessive and chain *takfiris*. This term refers to members of an Islamic school of thought, from the years after the death of Prophet Muhammad, known for their radical approach to *takfir*.

Over time, the excessive *takfiri* and chain *takfiri* movements became more popular, and as a result, disagreements between members of this extremist sect and ISIS grew. First, *takfiris* started peacefully raising questions. One former fighter recalled, “I would question powerful ISIS sheikhs about whether they had read the book *Ignorance Is Not an Excuse in Islam* [one of the main books for chain *takfiri* ideology]. The sheikhs would say they had but that it was not literal and that I did not understand its true meaning.”

Then they started complaining against authorities for not enforcing sharia law on civilians. In response, ISIS officials assured them they would

but said that it had to be done slowly so that locals would get used to it. Dissatisfied with this answer, some chain *takfiris* tried to take the matter into their own hands, looking to punish locals who conducted *shirk* (acts of worship to anything besides God) or *kufr*. Many volunteered for *Hisbah*—the police in charge of enforcing sharia law—but that did not help.

According to one former fighter who worked at a checkpoint, he would stop locals and ask them the basics of Islam. Once he even found an amulet in someone's car, an act of *shirk*. Not only did he not allow them to pass, he referred them to his group leader. When asked what he thought the leader should have done with those people, he replied, "First, it was important to explain Islam to them. But, of course, if they still resisted, they should be executed."

Chain *takfiris* also arrested cigarette smugglers and brought them to the sharia court, only to have the local judge let them go. "We were fighting and dying to live in the Islamic State," complained one former ISIS fighter, "and the locals not only did not care about sharia law, but also didn't want us to bother them with it." Some fighters turned to punishing violators outside of official avenues, but ISIS immediately stopped this practice as not to alienate civilians. When asked what they did if a person was involved in smuggling alcohol, a former chain *takfiri* fighter replied with visible disgust, "They should have been grateful that we brought them to the police station and did not kill them ourselves."⁶

When ISIS finally began organizing religious classes, *takfiris* disagreed with the curriculum. According to them, the only message ISIS taught was the need to fight and die: "In camps and schools, they only tell fighters about heaven, they do not even teach Tawheed," one of the fighters complained. In response, some chain *takfiris* organized lectures themselves and questioned official ISIS policies. In one instance, a group of less than a dozen ISIS fighters held lectures in Tabqa, discussing how there was no point in listening to Baghdadi or anyone else; instead, one should only read the Quran and Sunna—everything was written there. They objected to following ISIS sheikhs and their interpretation of religious texts. Instead, they wanted fighters to read the texts and understand them for themselves. Their

⁶ Although interviewed chain *takfiris* were not aware of it, many ISIS emirs were themselves involved in alcohol and cigarette smuggling. According to interviewed smugglers who were delivering goods into ISIS-held Hawija, they were paying a 30 percent cut to ISIS emirs for protecting their business.

mission, they believed, was to teach as many people as possible to not fight, but instead to study true Islam.

ISIS could not afford to ignore such discord within its ranks and started retaliating, albeit peacefully, at first. The Central Office for Monitoring the Sharia Bureaus issued a statement (No. 155) not only stating ISIS's official position on the issue of *takfir* but also forbidding ISIS members from engaging in theological disputes that could lead to declaring a fellow ISIS member *kafir*. ISIS leaders also talked to powerful sheikhs who were holding lectures, such as Abu Umar Kuwaiti, Abu Hajar Jazrawi, and Abu Jafar Tunisi. They asked them to stop their lectures. However, several people continued their lectures to a much smaller group of students and moved them underground.

ISIS leaders also sent their official sheikhs to talk to the units that were raising questions about *takfir*. Basically, the sheikhs said the issue of *takfir* was very complicated and that the fighters did not have enough religious knowledge to interpret it correctly. After that, at least in one unit, "the issue somehow died down," remembered a former fighter. Although it did not change his or others' position on the matter, they realized it was becoming too dangerous to speak about it openly. But in general, the sheikhs were far from solving the problem in the organization. In an Uzbek unit in Tabqa, for example, despite ISIS attempts, there were people like Abu Ahmad Uzbeki. He was not a sheikh but had studied in Egypt and had a reputation for knowledge, and he remained strongly behind the idea of chain *takfir*.

As expected, official statements and soft talk had little effect on group members. ISIS leaders were not only unable to stop it but had failed to grasp the scale of it. The ideas continued to spread quickly. As a consequence, ISIS became afraid of its members and began a two-pronged campaign to slow it down: ISIS leaders made some concessions to chain *takfiris* but also increased surveillance of them.

First, ISIS leaders agreed that excessive *takfiris* were right in the sense that many locals could not be considered Muslims, but at the same time, they claimed that they could not distinguish who exactly was Muslim and who was not. Nor, according to sharia, could they stop everyone on the streets to examine their knowledge of Islam. Chain *takfiris* strongly disagreed with this position. According to them:

Yes, it is true that by sharia, you could not stop a Muslim in a Muslim land and examine his religious knowledge. But in ISIS this is not applicable

because the assumption that ISIS territory is a land of Islam and Muslims is wrong. They are not Muslims. As a result, nothing should stop ISIS checking religious knowledge of people on its territory.

Largely to please chain *takfir*s, ISIS also started mandatory lectures on Islam for the local population, where civilians had to agree to follow particular rules. According to ISIS fighters, ISIS would mostly recruit locals for those lectures from the bazaar. Similar lectures called “sharia training” were started for fighters, at which they were told they were not allowed to intervene in ISIS politics, declare *takfir* on fighters of other groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (allowed to do so only on their emirs), or discuss issues related to ignorance in Islam and *takfir*.

Behind the scenes, ISIS emirs reported people who disagreed with the group to Amni, the internal security wing. All ISIS members were asked to fill out long (several pages), detailed forms describing their background. Basically, the Amni wanted to know a biography of ISIS members (date and place of birth, education, work before Syria), why they decided to come to Syria, who recommended them, and what Islamic books they had read. Those who refused to fill out the paperwork were denied their salaries. Amni also took steps to prevent new chain *takfir*s from joining ISIS by asking all newcomers about which sheikhs they followed and holding mandatory religion classes in boot camp to further screen prospective fighters before integrating them into units. But by then, it was way too late.

That triggered a spiral of confrontation: the more ISIS increased its terror within the organization, the more people became disillusioned and accused them of being non-Islamic. One Russian-speaking former ISIS fighter said, “In Dagestan, people have to constantly go to security services to answer questions . . . and here it is the same. How is ISIS different from the Russian FSB [internal security force]?” They even started calling Amni members *Amniachiky*, similar to the slang term for Russian security members, *FSBshniky*.

Soon a large-scale cat-and-mouse game between chain *takfir*s and Amni members started. It was not particularly challenging for Amni members to spot chain *takfir*s. According to the chain *takfir*s themselves, they would not reply to *Salam* (Islamic greeting) if they considered the greeter *kafir*,⁷

⁷ According to them, a Muslim was not allowed to say to a *kafir* “*Assalamualaikum Wa Rahmatullahi Wa Barakatuh*” (“Peace be upon you, so may the mercy of the Allah and his blessings”).

a behavior that is very visible on the streets or inside the unit. They would also not eat meat if they thought the animal was killed by a *kafir*, so instead of eating in their units, they would go to the bazaar, buy a live chicken, and kill it themselves.⁸ This abnormal behavior raised red flags, and other group members would immediately notify Amni. Amni members, too, were easy to recognize: they had short beards, wore civilian clothes and masks that covered their faces, and often drove black cars (most cars in Iraq and Syria are white).

Surveillance was extensive. Foreigners recruited as informants would provoke anti-ISIS discussions in the ethnic units and record them. Group members lived in a state of terror, afraid to criticize ISIS even inside their units and houses. While discussing operational problems inside of ISIS was still permissible, criticizing Baghdadi and al-Adnani (Al Baghdadi close associate) personally was not.

The crisis escalated, and “Islamic scholars were the first targets,” one former ISIS fighter recalled. Sheikhs were “detained,” after which some changed their views. For example, Abu Hanifa Dagestani and Abu Banat, who had declared *takfir* on ISIS military emir Umar Shishani, stopped talking about declaring *takfir* after they were released.

For other sheikhs, detention did not silence them, so they were silenced in other ways. In the fall of 2014, Abu Jafar Tunisi and his wife were driving near Tabqa when they were stopped by Amni at a roadblock. Abu Jafar Tunisi was abducted, his car hijacked, and his wife left on the side of the road. She walked to the nearest town to contact someone to pick her up, but she never saw her husband again.

Probably the most famous chain *takfiri* sheikh, Abu Umar al-Kuwaiti, was killed after he declared *takfir* on ISIS leadership because they refused to destroy the grave of a Sufi sheikh in Raqqa.⁹ The house of another prominent *takfiri*, Abu Ahmad Uzbeki, was blown up the day after he was arrested by the Amni. “His unit was supposed to move to Iraq, and ISIS didn’t want him to go there and spread his ideas even further,” commented one of his friends in ISIS.

⁸ In the bazaar, a seller would hold a live chicken while a chain *takfiri* would cut its throat himself. Then the seller would clean the bird and package it.

⁹ According to chain *takfiris*, Sufists were not Muslims because they conducted *shirk*, the sin of idolatry or polytheism. Sufists prayed on the graves of their sheikhs, which excessive *takfiris* saw as the establishment of “partners” placed beside God.

But at that point, it was too late to stop the spread of the chain *takfir* movement by killing its leaders. (Even after Abu Ahmad Uzbeki was killed, recordings of his lectures were widely distributed in units.) Before long, regular fighters started disappearing as well. Once Amni members got information about chain *takfiris*, they would break into their houses and kidnap them. In one of the biggest Amni operations of that kind, interviewed fighters remembered, ten members of an Uzbeki unit were arrested at a wedding gathering. At other times, people would leave their house and just disappear forever.

One interviewed former ISIS foreign fighter described how he was arrested:

Me and my friend [a Chechen] from the same unit were driving back to Tabqa from a bazaar. There was a temporary checkpoint stopping all passing cars and checking documents, looking for someone. It appeared that they were waiting for us. They stopped us, checked our names against the list, and when there was a match, they stormed the car, took our weapons, blindfolded us and took us to the prison.

Although these and other chain *takfiris* were sent to prisons, local Amni members told their families that Baghdadi had invited them to his house “for a talk.” Some even believed it at first.

When fighters vanished, their families were often not able to support themselves. Soon the problem reached a scale that was impossible to hide. “We first learned about this from rumors,” one former fighter remembered. “Some wives started receiving notices that their husbands had been executed for being disbelievers. The number rose to the thousands.”

At the same time, Amni operatives also became more violent in their operations, in part because they were simply afraid of chain *takfiris*, particularly ones who had suicide belts.¹⁰ Because chain *takfiris* considered ISIS their main enemy, they would not hesitate to use all the weapons they had against Amni. According to a chain *takfiri* in the previous example (who was arrested at the checkpoint), “I did not have my belt with me at that

¹⁰ While there were fighters who wore suicide belts all the time (leaders and fighters conducting *inimasi* operations where, at the end of the operation, they would detonate their belts), for the majority of fighters, wearing it all the time was not mandatory.

time. It was at home. But if members of Amni would have showed up when I was at home, I would not have hesitated to detonate it.”

At the same time, ISIS started losing on the frontline, and interviewed former ISIS chain *takfiris* connected that to ISIS’s repression of them—the true Muslims. “In the beginning, when ISIS was closer to Islam, they enjoyed military victories. Then when they started killing *takfiris* and, as a result, become more distant from Islam, they were punished and started losing,” commented one former fighter. He also agreed on the rational explanation that ISIS started losing because they pulled all their resources and attention away from the frontline and turned them toward internal policing. Nevertheless, it reinforced the belief of those group members even further.

Life became a nightmare for chain *takfiri* fighters who continued to disseminate their beliefs. Soon after they had begun lectures persuading ISIS members not to fight, two Central Asian members of the sect, Muhammad and Ahmad (names changed), were stationed in Tabqa when they realized they were being followed.¹¹ Both fighters knew it would not be long until they were targeted. Because their wives were sisters, the two couples were all in the same house. At 2 a.m., Muhammad left the house for an hour to meet another group member and persuade him not to answer ISIS’s call to fight in Iraq. When he left, someone knocked on the door and asked Ahmad to come out so he could ask him a question. Ahmad was willing to talk to them, but asked for a second to put a T-shirt on. As he went back upstairs, members of the Amni smashed through the door, put Ahmad on the floor, blindfolded him, and dragged him down the stairs while his pregnant wife and her sister watched. They put him in the car and drove away.

When Muhammad returned, he looked for his brother-in-law, asking around the whole neighborhood. To calm the panic that ensued, a major ISIS official, Sheikh al-Qachtani, came to their neighborhood the next morning. He said it was a mistake that members of Amni took Ahmad with such excessive force, but they had just wanted to invite him to talk to Baghdadi in his house, and that he would return home soon.

Time passed and, of course, Ahmad did not return. Muhammad soon went to Sheikh al-Qachtani’s office to inquire about his brother-in-law.

¹¹ Evidently, some Amni were very unprofessional and easily spotted. Muhammad recalled, “They would park the same car in front of a suspect’s house and not move it for days. For a while, there was a fighter from Tunisia who kept asking me about problems in our unit, but everyone knew he was with the Amni because his car was always seen near their office.”

His family was worried, and his wife had even had a miscarriage. The sheikh promised to find out but said that the Adnani (chief of Amni) had taken him, so the case was not under his jurisdiction anymore. After that, what they dreaded had become clear: Ahmad had been executed, and Muhammad would be next.

Other extremist individuals who realized they were already being watched tried to hide in the caliphate's periphery and quickly settled on one of two options. One option was to retire from combat and move closer to the Turkish border. Although this option was desirable, it was also very risky. A foreigner living alone and not participating in unit activities was easily recognizable to the Amni and easily targeted. A second option was volunteering to fight in Mosul. These chain *takfiris* felt physically safer from ISIS in Mosul, but they found Iraq to be even less religious than Syria. "I thought only Raqqa did not follow Islam," a former fighter said, "so it was shocking to see Mosul, the second largest town in the Islamic State, was even less religious." According to him, there were hookah bars and almost no ISIS members visible on the streets. One ISIS militant at a checkpoint was wearing an Iraqi army uniform with the official patch still on it. The former fighter was disgusted: "I ripped it off and dropped it on the ground because it was not Islamic to wear it," he said. "But the guy picked it up and put it back on. He said it looked good on his uniform." These kinds of issues just fueled the extreme chain *takfiri* sect even more.

There were even Amni members who took hold of chain *takfiri* ideology. In Raqqa, a Turkish Amni member also accused ISIS of being against Islam, and he used his position to help members of the sect. He not only notified *takfiris* who were on the target list but even helped them escape to Turkey.

Those who were unable to get away were arrested and then immediately sent to a maximum-security prison and placed on death row. Although ISIS had sharia courts, chain *takfiri* cases, officially called "disbelief in Islam," were handled, in their entirety, by the Amni. The prison and in particular those cases were kept secret, so all the other prisoners released from these facilities were searched to ensure no letters made it to the outside world. As a result, most people in ISIS-controlled territory did not know about the prison or the chain *takfiris*.

The prison, located under a big stadium in Raqqa, was so crowded that prisoners had to sleep on their sides so they could all fit on the cold concrete floor, and there were no blankets. Said one foreign fighter who spent four months there:

That was where I finally understood how fake everything [ISIS, caliphate] was. Islam says you should treat a prisoner as yourself, yet they were torturing people with electricity. There is also no unfairness allowed in Islam, yet none of the guards seemed to care about that; yet all the while, prison guards kept using Islamic rhetoric, saying, “Brother, believe me, we swear to Allah we will let you go in two hours. You are our brother.”

In prison, the first thing guards checked was whether or not the inmate considered ISIS Islamic. They would give him cooked chicken for his first dinner and would watch, via cameras, to see what he did with it. If he did not eat the meat, it was because he believed the ISIS members who killed the chicken were nonbelievers, a clear indication that he was an excessive or chain *takfiri*.

First, chain *takfiris* were threatened with accusations of spying on and killing members of ISIS from behind during military operations. But unlike people who were in fact accused of those charges, ISIS did not torture them as much. ISIS mostly wanted to change their opinion and find out who else did not agree with its authority. So sometimes they used milder techniques. They would even try bringing neighbors and friends into the cell as prisoners in hopes that an accused fighter would be more willing to talk to them.

These prisoners were often advised by cellmates to feign ignorance by asking guards very basic questions about Islam. By doing so, it would seem like they were just misguided but would accept the ISIS interpretation of Islam if it were explained properly. This was a ploy worth trying. As soon as he got to prison, one fighter, who had been caught trying to leave ISIS, immediately admitted that he had declared *takfir* on ISIS and asked to talk to an ISIS sheikh. A sheikh came and explained ISIS’s official position on *takfir*, at which point the fighter admitted he made a mistake and regretted it. The guards returned the fighter to his cell, where he spent several months serving his prison term.

Another chain *takfiri* shared a different story. He did not admit that he made a mistake, because, according to him, lying is not allowed in Islam. When, in prison, interrogators asked him who else had been in his study group, he had to get creative:

I could not lie because it is against Islam, but I also didn’t want to put my friends in jail, so I did not give straightforward answers. I told them that

no one else in my group understood real Islam as I did, and that I really regretted what I had done. What I meant was that I had regretted ever coming to Syria—but I did not add that.

After ISIS obtained all the necessary information, they also sent a sheikh to this inmate to explain ISIS's religious doctrine. As he remembered, "Several prisoners were blindfolded, and Abu Bakr al-Qachtani came to our prison cell to tell us about our mistakes. While he was talking, we didn't say a word, but of course, there was no way he was going to change our minds."

Members of the Amni also tried to humiliate chain *takfir*s and use their Islamic beliefs against them. When one *takfiri* was caught on the Turkish border trying to escape, members of Amni hit him with a rifle. Then, while they were loading a pistol to pretend to execute him and he began to recite *shahada*,¹² they laughed and made fun of him, calling him an unbeliever.¹³

In very rare cases, family members of these fighters were able to locate their loved ones and would try to visit or bring something to prison. One jailed chain *takfiri*'s wife brought her husband an MP3 player so he could listen to the Quran, but guards confiscated it and put him in solitary confinement. Also, in some cases, guards did not allow prisoners arrested on "disbelief in Islam" charges to even pray.

Punishment for excessive or chain *takfir* was also different. While spies were executed, and individuals who just wanted to escape were given lashes and light prison sentences, chain *takfir*s were in the middle, and ISIS kept readjusting what to do with them. In the beginning, everyone suspected on those charges was immediately executed. Later, as combat intensified (more people were getting killed and wounded) and the number of incoming foreign fighters decreased, ISIS declared an amnesty. Basically, a person imprisoned on "disbelief in Islam" charges could agree that he made a mistake and volunteer to go to the frontline, where he could either conduct a suicide mission or fight in one of the "punishment" units, the ones that were expected to have the most casualties.¹⁴

¹² The Muslim profession of faith: "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah."

¹³ On the other side, according to fighters, people who were executed for disbelief in Islam were buried as Muslims compared to people executed, for example, on spy charges, who were not.

¹⁴ ISIS members being held on spy charges were not allowed to volunteer for suicide missions because, according to prison guards, "One needs to earn the honor of becoming a suicide bomber."

In one case, a chain *takfiri* prisoner was asked if he wanted to take part in a battle that had started in Kobane. “I said, ‘I want to die on the path of Allah,’” he commented. “But really, I just wanted to get out of prison and tell people what was going on there.” ISIS then brought him a contract with some points he had to agree on. In particular, he had to agree “not to talk about ISIS mistakes, or how they were against the Quran and Sunna, or how they were not following sharia law. Basically, I would be only fighting.” Then they sent him to the frontline. Another fighter, after finishing his term in prison, was sent to a Tajiki unit in Deir Ezzor. Although there was no big operation taking place, there were assault units, and it was distant from the main ISIS territory. Four chain *takfiris* from the same prison cell were sent there (a person from the Caucasus and three Uzbeks).¹⁵ ISIS also sent chain *takfiris* in 2015 to Hama, again probably due to its remote location.

Of course, ISIS’s approach to stemming the chain *takfiri* movement did not sit well with the family members of imprisoned fighters. Sometimes, when they were kidnapped, their wives would look for them and even get the community in their home country involved. In one case, in 2014, a Russian-speaking ISIS fighter left his home in northern Syria one day and disappeared. His wife went to local ISIS leaders. They told her that her husband had been sent to a training camp in Shirkat, and that the camp had been attacked by the coalition and that her husband had died. Later, in a private conversation, the director of the camp admitted to the woman that there had been no attack on the camp, but that her husband never reached the camp in the first place. Desperate for the truth, she turned to her home community in Russia. They helped her find a person with connections in Turkey who agreed to try to find her husband. Although he knew people high in the ISIS chain of command, he also was not able to find him, but he was able to get the woman widow status, important in internal ISIS bureaucracy so she could obtain payment and support.

If a wife of a killed chain *takfiri* fighter also supported the chain *takfiri* ideology, she had problems remarrying, which was a big problem in ISIS. No only could she not marry someone from the group (according to her, they are *kafirs* and she could only marry a Muslim), but the fact that she repeatedly declined marriage offers was suspicious.

¹⁵ Among them, two people managed to escape to Turkey; of the other two, one was killed in combat and one was caught by the FSA.

But not all family members of imprisoned chain *takfiris* were so passive. One woman (from Tunisia) went to the prison where her husband had been sentenced and, using an AK47, shot everyone inside. In another case, when a fighter from Uzbekistan was arrested on “disbelief in Islam” charges, his sixteen-year-old wife from Kazakhstan was also arrested and put in the female prison. Her father, a member of an assault unit, did not agree with the decision and asked his unit leader for help. Because there was no peaceful way to free the fighter’s daughter, they did it by force. Two cars full of fighters—in uniform and carrying their weapons—entered the prison and demanded the girl be set free. Because the prison guards had neither the will nor the ability to defend the prison, they let her go.

Naturally, this incident was not taken lightly by Amni leadership. First, the unit’s leader, Khattab, was arrested and disappeared. Then, other group members who had participated in the operation also ended up in prison—the same prison the young girl’s husband was housed in. Exacerbated by the massive arrests, the disagreement between chain *takfiris* and ISIS leadership reached a dangerous level. Many fighters began to plan escapes from ISIS while others were thinking about a coup. “Some Uzbeks and a Chechen from my group wanted to radically oppose ISIS leadership, starting with kidnapping of an Amni member spying on their unit,” one former foreign fighter from Dagestan recalled. “[But] our first priority is to study the basics of religion and then decide who is to blame and whom to fight.”

The last straw, at least for one Russian-speaking community in ISIS, was Elvir, an Azerbaijani ISIS member. Despite ISIS’s efforts, that particular case led to major internal conflict in the organization and sent the chain *takfiri* problem spiraling out of control. Because no one could explain the situation better than someone who lived through it, I have included a translated letter one former ISIS foreign fighter wrote explaining the event. This letter is a result of his time as an ISIS prisoner, when he and his friends (also inmates) promised each other they would tell the world what happened to them. Since he was the only one to survive, he wrote nine pages of memories about the event and his friends who were killed. When ISIS was largely defeated in 2017, he agreed for it to be published (all names and *kunyas* in this text are original because they are all dead now).¹⁶

¹⁶ The letter was written in Russian. Instead of translating it literally, I tried to show the main idea. Because this former ISIS foreign fighter is not fluent in written Russian, translating it literally would be confusing.

When I was arrested, I was put in prison with people on similar charges [disbelief in Islam]. I was in that prison for a month when, one day, we got a new inmate. He was from Azerbaijan. I spoke bad Azerbaijani, but thankfully, he spoke Russian. His name was Abu Maryam, and his job had been to take care of the families of Azerbaijani fighters in Raqqa. He had lived with his three daughters (twelve, ten, and six years old), and an old fellow Azeri called Abu Yakub.

When he arrived, he had been severely beaten and terrified. He was caught by ISIS intelligence on the border with Turkey and accused of being *murtad* [a Muslim who consciously abandoned Islam in word or through deed] and had been beaten on the way from Al Bab to Raqqa prison.

He was crying and asking the other inmates what was going to happen to him. We did not sugarcoat it. We told him that, with those charges against him, he did not have a chance of survival. No one from our prison cell [on those charges] had survived yet. At first, Abu Maryam did not want to tell the whole story behind his imprisonment, but one day after his interrogation, he returned to the cell and explained everything.

As he later found out, one of his friends was an undercover Amni informant who recorded conversations in their house. He also mentioned another Azeri called Elvir. I had heard about Elvir before, from when I was in another cell with an Azeri called Karman, who was Elvir's brother. Karman had officially declined to fight for ISIS and returned his weapon to his emir. His emir had informed the Amni, and Karman was arrested. At that time, he lived with his brother Elvir, and when the Amni members came to arrest Karman, he told Elvir to jump out of the window and run away because he had to survive to take care of both of their families.

It happened that Karman had been a close friend of Abu Maryam, and when he was freed from prison, he went to Abu Maryam and offered him to leave ISIS together. Abu Maryam refused, and Karman successfully escaped alone.

At that time, Elvir was already wanted by ISIS internal security, and soon, they also accused Abu Maryam of preparing a coup because they recorded Elvir's conversation about it. In this conversation, Elvir was saying that ISIS members were not Muslims, and that they just used religion for their own purposes. Karman also contacted Abu Maryam from Turkey, promising they would attack ISIS from there. Him telling Elvir and Abu Yakub about it was also recorded by Amni.

As a consequence, Abu Maryam was brutally beaten and tortured in prison and was interrogated by Abu Jihad¹⁷ himself. They wanted to know Karman's plans. They were even bringing people Abu Maryam knew from before to the cell, hoping that he would talk to them.

Abu Maryam also explained that two other Azeri ISIS members (Ikrim and Abu Zara) had agreed to help Elvir drive to the border, where Amni shot at the car, killing him, his wife, and a young sister and arresting Ikrim and Abu Zara. According to Abu Maryam, ISIS was very afraid of Elvir because he was recorded saying he would never surrender and they would never take him alive. Also, right before that, the Amni had contacted Elvir by WhatsApp to meet and promised to just peacefully discuss his disagreements with ISIS. When he came to the meeting in the center of Raqqa, he realized it was a trap, opened fire, and managed to run away.

A month after our discussion of those events, a prison guard came to our cell and gave Abu Maryam a piece of paper saying, "Memorize it, you will have to say it tomorrow on camera." We started reading what was written there. It said, "I am Abu Maryam. I was killing ISIS members because they were not Muslims. Ikrim and Abu Zara were with me, and Elvir was our emir. He ordered us to poison ISIS members." When I read it, I knew it was a death sentence for Abu Maryam. He was shocked and started telling everyone that he was not guilty. When we managed to calm him down, I told him not to read those words the next day, even if they torture you.

The next day he was taken, and I was very worried about him. But after a half-hour, Abu Maryam came back. I asked him if he did the video confession. He replied that he did not want to, but Abu Jihad was pressing him, saying that "if you do not say that, not only you will be killed, you will be buried without *kafan*,¹⁸ like a dog." Abu Jihad also told him the video would be watched by ISIS leadership, and they would pardon him.

He eventually agreed to say what was written, but only about Elvir, because he knew that Elvir was already dead, while Ikrim and Abu Zara were still alive (although in prison). After several days, he was asked to redo the confession video again, because, according to Abu Jihad, "The confession did not look honest."

¹⁷ A senior Russian-speaking Amni member.

¹⁸ A white cotton cloth used to wrap a dead body.

[In the video, later distributed by ISIS, Abu Maryam is recorded saying, “My brothers considered local people *mushrik* [polytheist] and wanted to kill them and loot their property. We considered Islamic State *kafirs* because they did not declare *takfir* on local people, considering them brothers instead. We considered Emir Al Muamineen [al-Baghdadi] *mushrik* because he collected *zakat* from local *mushriks*.¹⁹ We had an emir and his name was Elvir. We wanted to kill emirs, sheikhs, and Amni leadership. Elvir was telling us when, inshAllah, we could start killing the Islamic State. Then Americans, PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party), and FSA will enter and we will have an opportunity to destroy Islamic State from inside.”²⁰]

After doing it [the video], Abu Maryam believed he would be freed soon, although deep inside he probably realized that it is not true, and he asked me to become a guardian of his children. I refused because I was sure I would not survive either. As expected, in several days prison guards came after him. Everyone in the cell was congratulating him, but I knew he would be killed. I hugged him, knowing that it would be the last time I’d see him.

In a month I was moved to another cell, where an Arab inmate asked me if I was from Azerbaijan and if I knew Ikrim. This inmate was with him in another prison, and they had become friends. Unfortunately, he said Ikrim had also been killed, after being beaten and tortured, because his charge was very serious.

Soon, the prison guards brought a computer to our cell to show us the video of Abu Maryam, Abu Yakub, Ikrim, and Abu Zara’s confessions. After that, another fellow prisoner from Turkey said that Abu Zara had been in the cell next to him, and that he had heard ISIS torturing him and how he was crying. Through a hole in the wall, he even saw how Amni members had handcuffed Abu Zara to the wall, and he was screaming “blood” in Arabic, meaning that those handcuffs had stopped his blood flow. The interrogators were just laughing at him. The inmate also warned me to never talk about those people or that case if I wanted to survive.

¹⁹ Based in Islam, *zakat* is paid only by Muslims. So based on this sentence, because Baghdadi was collecting *zakat* from locals, he considered them Muslims. Based on a chain *takfir* logic, if those locals were *kafirs*, so was Baghdadi.

²⁰ In the same video Ikrim, Abu Zara, and Abu Yakub said very similar text both in Russian and Azerbaijani. In addition, the video started with Baghdadi proudly saying how ISIS was fighting against defectors and *murtads* (but this part was cut when it was later distributed online).

Why did they want to kill them all? Because they knew Elvir and how the Amni had killed him and his family. This incident caused a lot of chaos in ISIS ranks and a lot of fighters got disappointed in Amni, so ISIS had to somehow rationalize their behavior and turn the blame on Elvir. First, they were saying that Elvir killed his sister and wife, but was killed himself when he opened fire at Amni. No one believed this story. When people started asking why he shot his family, ISIS explained that he did not want to surrender, but that raised even more questions. As a final resort, ISIS made the confession video.

Abu Yakub was shown as someone who, from the beginning, was not sure about ISIS, so he did not participate in military operations and did not have a weapon. Abu Maryam also did not participate in operations and did not even go through boot camp. He was only taking care of his children. Both Ikrim and Abu Zara were fresh recruits (a few months out of boot camp) and their only crime was driving Elvir to the border. But on the video, ISIS made them all look like a danger to the organization.

The only mistake any of those guys made was realizing that ISIS members were not true Muslims and witnessing what the Amni did to Elvir and his family. But ISIS could not afford for them to talk, and Amni had to get rid of them. Could you imagine what would have happened if they would have run away? It would have been a disaster for ISIS's reputation. Even during my interrogation, ISIS asked us if we know anything about this case.

After this video, major problems in the Islamic State started. Fighters began to attack Amni members (stabbing, shooting . . .). This video helped many ISIS members realize that ISIS leadership was not following true Islam.

Mitigating the Danger on a High Level

It would be a mistake to think that chain *takfiris* were only low-level fighters in the ISIS organization. As any ideology, it also affected people who were in higher positions, and that fact was much more dangerous for ISIS. As a result, there was also an ideological conflict in the group's upper ranks. This conflict between mainstream ISIS leaders and people who were following the teachings of Sheikh Hazimi are illustrated by the memories of Abu Anisa Dagestani.

Abu Anisa Dagestani was a foreign fighter from Dagestan who started his ISIS career in charge of sharia law in the Haibar *katiba* (military unit). Then he became a military judge of the Raqqa governorate and finally rose through the ranks to become a member of a four-person committee on *manhaj* (way of belief, worship, and interacting with others), which was also in charge of *fatwas* (religious ruling), all in addition to his work for Amni. As he pointed out, he was one of only four people allowed to represent ISIS on matters of religion. Ideologically, he leaned toward chain *takfir*, yet he largely hid it for career purposes.

He left ISIS (and Syria) in 2017, and wrote a twenty-five-page letter that was shared by the chain *takfiri* community. The letter provides a rare glimpse of the decision-making process of the top ISIS leadership in relation to the spread of the chain *takfir* ideology. The authenticity of the letter was verified by several other chain *takfiris* (and former ISIS foreign fighters) who knew the author personally. Although the author is fluent in Russian (the language in which the letter was written), it was written for people familiar with ISIS's internal conflict with chain *takfiris*, so it requires major clarifications. Although I have translated, abridged, and edited it for clarity, I have tried to transmit his words as close to the original as possible, including the offensive language.

When ISIS acquired control of a large territory and compulsory religious education started, the question of an official ISIS position on major religious concepts was raised. In particular, the question of whether Islam allows for interaction with a non-sharia court or it was a reason for a declaration of *takfir* [one of the important topics for chain *takfiris*] was widely discussed among group members. Quickly, the first major discussion about the issue happened on the highest level, including ISIS sharia experts such as Turki Binali and Al Qahtani, and sheiks such as Sheikh Salim. After this meeting, ISIS decided to kill everyone who disagreed with them on issues of *takfir* and to ban discussions of it altogether. Sheikh Salim, who during the meeting very respectfully disagreed with Turki Binali, the chief sharia authority in ISIS, was shot by Amni almost immediately after the event.

Another similar ideological conflict started around this time, but between Turki Binali and Sheikh Abu Djafar. During one discussion, Turki Binali said the rule “a person who does not declare *takfir* on *kafir* is *kafir*” [a main chain *takfiri* concept] is a general rule and does not apply to people

on an individual level. According to Abu Malik al Khandji, who was an assistant to Abu Djafar and was present during this discussion, Abu Djafar became extremely agitated with what he heard and called Turki Binali ignorant, but Baghdadi took sides with Turki Binali and basically told Abu Djafar to shut up. At the same time, Baghdadi gave Abu Djafar permission to write an article to prove his religious point of view, basically allowing him to defend his position. Why did Abu Bakr side with Turki Binali and Qahtani and not the sheikhs who were leaning more towards chain *takfiri* ideology? Because the old policy for ideology had worked for a long time (basically since Zarqawi), so why would ISIS change it? The opinions of Turki Binali and Qahtani nicely lined up with this old policy, and those of Abu Djafar did not.

While working on his paper, Abu Djafar disappeared. For a long time, no one understood what was happening. We were told he was with Baghdadi. We thought, "Great. It is exactly a right place for him." At that time, we still trusted ISIS leadership, so we were not that worried yet and hoped the situation in ISIS would stabilize. Eventually it surfaced that Abu Djafar was accused of attempting a coup and collecting allegiance to himself. I found out the full truth later while working for Amni, where I had access to Abu Djafar case.

He was killed because he was present at a meeting where other sheikhs talked about a possible coup against ISIS due to *marjiism* [offensive word referring to people not supporting excessive *takfir* ideas] and Abu Djafar did not say anything against it. For ISIS, it did not matter that Abu Djafar had called for allegiance to Baghdadi from the very beginning and had stayed with ISIS through its hardest moments; he had personally participated in battles, and despite being wounded in combat and undergoing treatment, he continued with his work. Despite that, he was still killed.

In time, more religious questions arose, and Amni worked more actively against people who disagreed with ISIS on religious grounds, at least among Russian speakers. Musa Abu Usuf Shishani and Abu Jihad Karachai, top Russian-speaking Amni members, considered it their top priority to spread ISIS opinions (basically those of Qahtani and Turki Binali) on religious matters. Everyone who disagreed was identified, arrested, and liquidated. Hundreds of brothers were killed. Some were killed for disagreeing on second-level *takfir*, some on the issue of working with non-sharia courts, and others because they did not consider the people who lived in so-called Muslim countries Muslims. They were all

killed after being accused of starting internal splits and infighting. After that, everyone became quiet about their opinions and became suspicious of authorities. Yet not many people protested because they were thinking, “The sheikhs are to blame, and when Baghdadi learns about what is going on, he will fix everything.”

I was also asked to appear in the Amni office around that time, and it was not something to joke about. It was a very dangerous situation—I was living a nightmare—and I did not know if I would also disappear. Some of my friends were already distancing themselves from me. But a close friend advised me not to deal with Amni, but instead to go higher—directly to the religious authority office. And that is what I did.

As expected, they wanted to talk about my opinion on second-level *takfir*. Personally, I was following Sheikh Hazimi [main sheikh supporting the idea of second-level *takfir*] on the issue but was tolerant of the ISIS position. I was hoping that one day, through my work, I would be able to affect the official ISIS position, so for now, I was quiet. Even in the *katiba* where I was in charge of sharia, I approached the topic very carefully so that my brothers would not have problems with ISIS. The issue of chain *takfir* had never even been raised by me. I was trying to be quiet on this issue. But step by step Musa Abu Usuf Shishani and Abu Jihad Karachai, while smiling to my face, stabbed me in the back and persuaded Qahtani and Baghdadi himself that I was a major proponent of chain *takfir* and, as a result, a potential leader of the opposition.

So I went to meet with them. Very quickly the discussion moved from a religious dispute into a conflict, where Qahtani openly said, “Listen, you are starting internal problems, and we will not tolerate it. You are moving away from Islam, you do not respect the religious authority of Baghdadi, and because of your actions, infighting started and in Iraq brothers are already not praying together.” While saying it, Qahtani was looking at Abu Jihad, who was shaking his head in agreement. I was shocked by the style of the discussion. Instead of an academic religious discussion, it was more like a Mafia fight in the ’hood.

I told Qahtani that for me, Imam Abu Bakr is an absolute authority and if he told me to change my opinion on religious issues, I would do so immediately. So I absolutely backed down and accepted my misconception. I did it because if I would not have done so, I would have been killed immediately, and also, at that point, I was still not entirely sure exactly what was right from the religious point of view.

Still, after that, Abu Jihad came to visit me to make sure I totally supported the official ISIS opinion on religious issues and the ultimate authority of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. When I assured him of it, he promised to support me in the future. Finally the problem was solved. We reconciled with Qahtani and apologized to each other, and I was even promoted to a job in the ISIS office working on religious matters.

Then something incredible happened. Some brothers (among them Abu Ubeida Turki) managed to persuade Abu Muhammad al Furkan, a leader of Amni, that “there are *murjeets* in ISIS” [people who refuse to declare *takfir* on others]. Furkan, of course, was trying to act like he was surprised and mad about it, as if he did not know it before. Not only did he know everything about it from the very beginning, as a leader of Amni, he was behind killing the people who were saying that.

He had also begun collecting information on all the people working on religious issues in ISIS—where they studied, their biographies, their opinions on key questions, and so on. And he found out that a lot of people *irjaa* [refuse to declare *takfir*]. So now the opinion of the Islamic State changes. Now Qahtani and Turki Binali become the bad guys who have been hiding important information from himself and Baghdadi.

The work on a new religious decree began. We were celebrating because in addition to declaring *takfir* on al-Nusra, this decree posed a threat to *murjeets* who do not declare *takfir* on *murtads* [here referring to moderate armed groups]. Because this decree was initiated by Furkan, who was an absolute authority in ISIS (because he used to film Zarqawi and he trusted him and he had taught religion in Bucca camp where all main ISIS leaders were in prison), we regained hope that soon we would be able to absolutely change the ISIS position on this matter. Looking retrospectively at this decree, however, it was also not a religious *aqida*, but instead full of politics—“we say/we do not say; we think/we do not think; we accept something/we prohibit something; we advise, and we order.”

At the same time, ISIS published another decree—amnesty for individuals accused of excessive *takfir*. Now, even a person who called Baghdadi *kafir* and that his wife could be a slave would not be killed. Basically, ISIS declared that “excessive *takfir* was provoked by *murjeets*” (meaning Qahtani and Turki Binali), and that the question should be approached delicately without mass killings.

After that, I was invited to work in an office in charge of *manhaj*. It was the main ISIS office in charge of religion, and it was under Hadji Abdul

Nasir, Abu Hamza al Kurdi, and other people with a Haji title—basically all the most important people in ISIS who had been imprisoned in Bucca with Baghdadi. Our main task was to prepare answers to questions that rise among the leadership based on the teachings of Islam. We were also in charge of religious curriculum on military bases and in mosques, and appointing and firing people in charge of sharia in any other office, institution, or military unit.

We immediately started working on a big report to clarify our position on *murjeets*, *muslims* [meaning the right way], and people excessive in *takfir*. We also tackled some of the most controversial issues, such as who could be excused of big *shirk*, cooperating with a non-sharia court, voting in elections, second-level *takfir*, and many issues. We were sending files with our ongoing research to Baghdadi, and he was returning it with comments. He was very carefully following our work on this document.

While I was working there, an emir of Amni came and complained that there were no Russian speakers in the Amni office who were on a right *aqida* (this emir was also leaning toward the teachings of Sheikh Hazimi). Abu Zeid proposed my candidacy, and I agreed to take this job part time. Although while I was there no one was killed for excessive *takfir*, I did not like what I saw there (a person could spend forty days there waiting for a religious scholar to talk to him). We, as a religious council, were pushing to have an ultimate authority on detaining people on those charges.

In the office in charge of *manhaj*, while we were still working on the report, we were constantly disturbed by problems of office politics among major ISIS figures. Everyone was writing to the caliph and complaining about everyone else. I read notes from Furkan about Turki Binali, from Turki Binali about Furkan, from Turki Binali about Abu Hujaifa, from Abdu Nasir about Qahtani; everyone was trying to sink everyone else. And one could not avoid participating in these office politics because if you actually do your work and not play politics, you would lose your job in a week or so, and most likely also end up in jail. And the higher your position, the more dangerous it gets.

During Ramadan, we got an emergency order: we had to produce a paper, as soon as possible, about ISIS *manhaj* based on the work we already did. And the reason for such a rash order was a famous audio “Advice to Baghdadi,” where one brother openly explained what was going on in ISIS and, in particular, the religious disagreements inside. Then and only then

did Baghdadi and other leaders, afraid of the rumors, decide they needed to do something, like publishing this paper. So we started working.

Three months later, I had to go to Raqqa, and when we returned, we saw the paper had already been published. Of course, like any work produced in such a hurry, it had many mistakes. The person who signed and approved it for publication was Abdul Nasir, and the decision to publish it was obviously based on an order from Baghdadi. Before it was published, Abu Ubeida Turki and Abu Zaid Iraqi, members of our office, spent ten days in al Baghdadi's house discussing the issues we were working on. Also, this paper was against *murjeets*, and I believe Abdul Nasir was very tired of them, so he wanted to publish this work as soon as possible. (Before this paper was published, ISIS did not declare *takfir* on people who lived in so-called Muslim countries, but after it was published, ISIS was cornered, forcing it to accuse *murjeets* of heresy by not accepting their excuses.)

Immediately Turki Binali wrote a rebuttal camouflaging it as *nasihah* [advice]. Abdul Nasir invited him in and, in a very rude way, accused him of flip-flopping, showing him that what he wrote in this *nasihah* was the opposite of something he himself had written before, when it was politically appropriate. The next day, a drone attack killed both Turki Binali and Qahtani.

Immediately after that, Abu Jihad visited our office, and after we explained everything to him and he saw the stamp of our important office on the document, he publicly took a position on this paper. This was shocking to everyone who knows him, because he usually plays politically and does not publicly take anyone's position. Now he gathered his people and said that "finally, everything is clear—*takfir* is one of the basics of religion and the twenty pages of rebuttal (referring to a paper published by Turki Binali) was just a talk without any arguments."

The death of Turki Binali and Qahtani made the internal politics in the religious office even more complicated. *Murjeets* became angry with Abdul Nasir because, according to them, he crossed the line. As a result, they went to Iraq to meet with the Hajis, the most influential people in ISIS. (It is important to point out that basically, there were two Islamic States—one in Syria and one in Iraq.) They started crying out loud that we are *khavarije*, and that ISIS *aqida* used to be different, and since when are questions of *manhaj* being decided in our office, and why does our office have not one but two foreigners.

As a result, powerful ISIS people in Iraq disagreed, and a new wave of power games, this time between Syrian ISIS and Iraqi ISIS, started. In the end, Iraqi ISIS persuaded al Baghdadi that we were wrong and against Islam in ISIS, and if we continued with our position, an ideological split in ISIS was imminent. Military emirs, who were also invited to those meetings, testified that after publication of our paper, major problems started. Fighters started declaring *takfir* on each other, and that led to internal splits and military defeats. Baghdadi understood that it was a zero-sum game and he had to take a side, so he declared our already published paper to be wrong. Why?

There were several problems ISIS thought this new paper brought:

1. *Murjeets* had already started returning weapons and saying that they did not want to fight for a new, as they think, *khavarije aqida*. Some remote governorates that had pledged allegiance to ISIS, such as Sinai [in Egypt], had also declared they were considering canceling their allegiance if ISIS did not retract this new *aqida*. Also, ISIS was afraid to lose support from people outside of Syria who were providing them with money.

So of course politically, how could ISIS declare *takfir* on Egyptians, Saudis, and basically the whole Arab world? From a religious point of view, voting in elections is *kufir*, but the problem is that 99 percent of Egyptians vote. Also, if we consider that second-level *takfir* is a must, then Saudis are all *kafirs* because they do not declare *takfir* on the king. In that case, of course ISIS had to improvise and find excuses; for example, they said participation in elections is *kufir*, but there are exceptions, so we cannot apply this rule in general and need to look at people individually.

2. The influential ISIS members who had been behind the paper, Furkan and Adnani, had been killed. Only no-name people remained such as Abu Zeid and three foreigners (considered lower-level people by Arabs): the French Abu Ahmad, Abu Ubeida from Turkey, and me.

If, like before, for example, when Qahtani tried to turn everything back after Furkan published his first clarification to ISIS *aqida* that had turned ISIS in a different direction [closer to excessive *takfir*],

Qahtani and others met important people in Iraq and told them that it was never an ISIS *aqida*, etc. When Furkan heard about it and understood the danger of it, he also immediately left for Iraq to lobby. He also met with all those people and also called Qahtani into one of the meetings. In front of them he asked Qahtani what he had against this work. Were there any mistakes? Qahtani started mumbling that there are no mistakes, but some sentences should have been framed differently. Furkan immediately interrupted him, saying, “So you mean that we could not make a coherent sentence?” And that was the end of it. Furkan won and all the important people lost respect for Qahtani. He was a good politician and was able to fix such problems. But we who were left in the office were not. So when Furkan and Adnani died, *murjeets* were again putting pressure on Baghdadi, and Abdul Nasir alone was not able to fight it.

3. This new *aqida* put old ISIS sheikhs in a bad light, as if they were wrong on some issues before, and that was politically almost impossible for ISIS to admit. Yes, they could admit that some of their people had been wrong—but not the most powerful sheikhs. Basically, according to the *murjeets*, based on the new published paper, ISIS had to declare *takfir* on several of its own top people, something that ISIS could not afford because “no matter what, it was always right.” For Baghdadi, religious *aqida* was always in second place, at best; first was always the war. Even Furkan used to mention that “Imam is weak in terms of *manhaj*.”
4. Finally, at that point ISIS was getting weaker—was losing territory and people—so they needed help from al-Nusra. ISIS leadership even asked one person from our office to write a nice letter addressed to al Joulani, an al-Nusra leader, in order to normalize the relationship. He asked to specifically mention to al Joulani that “he is a son of our group” and “we need to unite in front of a common enemy,” and our published paper was basically putting an end to this move.

As a result, Baghdadi made a decision to merge our office in Syria with a similar office in Iraq, full of *murjeets*. He put Haji Abdullah in charge and appointed Abdul Nasir his deputy. Next, Abu Zaid and Abu Hafsa were called for a meeting in Iraq, where there were more than twenty *murjeets*. As usual, it was not a religious dispute but a

mafia gathering. But this time, they went even further and declared *takfir* on Abu Zaid. During this meeting, Al Bahdadi even apologized for supporting our paper and our office in the first place, saying, “They confused me.” But the problem of saving Baghdadi’s face still remained, so ISIS returned to a known method, claiming that “Baghdadi did not know anything.”

We were ordered not to leave our military base. We had waited for three days when a new director of Amni and a new director of the sharia office arrived. They immediately told us, “ISIS is returning to the previous *manhaj*, and all discussions of *takfir* are now prohibited again because everyone needs to concentrate on fighting the enemy. You are all fired, and there will be an investigation against you because you are guilty of splitting the group, which led to military defeats.”

Conclusion

Because religious ideology is a very powerful weapon to control group members, it must be used with caution lest it become counterproductive and be turned against a group’s leadership. Groups that choose to use it need to be sure they are always in total control of it. In particular, groups should be careful about accepting and promoting people who are more interested in ideology than in the group’s actual goals. And groups that choose to accept foreign fighters are in even greater danger of falling prey to their own ideology.

Looking at the conflict from a distance, many foreigners cannot see the nuances on the ground and are attracted by visible attributes of the group more than by the underlying goals of the conflict. As a result, when they decide to take the dangerous trip to the battlefield, there is a greater chance they are going to be attracted by the ideology their group claims to espouse.

If and when such ideological disagreements start to crop up, a group’s ability to wield control rapidly decreases. Leadership could imprison and execute members who ideologically disagree with them, but such a purge only alienates more group members. They could also let those members peacefully leave the group, but as in the case of ISIS, information about problems within the group would become public and could significantly hurt a group’s reputation. Also, often leaving is not even an option, because

in many cases with ideological organizations, their members are on a terrorist list and cannot return home to peacefully demobilize.

ISIS is not the only ideological organization to face such problems; communist Russia could serve as another example. While Russians understood they had to visibly comply with the enforced communist ideology, the majority of people did not take it seriously. At the same time, many foreigners who looked at the Soviet Union from abroad became interested in the ideas and philosophy of communism and moved to Russia, truly believing they could help build a utopian communist state. When they arrived in Russia, they became disillusioned with the reality they found, and many times tried to leave, but it was too late.

Over time, some people started disagreeing with the Politburo (the principal policymaking committee of the Communist Party). They questioned the leadership's dedication to the fundamentals of communism and the teachings of Lenin. Because they were a relatively small group, they did not endanger the Soviet Union's leadership. Nevertheless, they were immediately imprisoned in the Gulag (concentration camp) and later executed.

Israel is also facing a similar problem. Some groups of ultra-orthodox Jews do not recognize the state of Israel and its institutions. Although in the beginning several such anti-Israel Jews were assassinated, the Israeli government chose to negotiate with them and mitigate the disagreement. These groups are no longer obligated to serve in the army, and the state supports them materially while staying out of their communities' school systems, religious practices, law enforcement agencies, and justice systems. Although in rare cases individual group members are briefly arrested, their leaders are not. In exchange, these groups do not challenge the state. And although the government still manages to peacefully control them, they are becoming an increasing problem, and the government has to keep a close eye on them.

8

Managing Ideology

In the previous chapter, I showed the negative side effects of using ideology as a screening mechanism by an armed group, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), and how, while raising the bar for dedication, ideology also raises the bar for extremism and makes it almost impossible to control. In particular, radical Islamist ideology and a large number of foreign fighters, especially in the case of ISIS and other groups in Syria, put groups in danger in several ways.

First of all, it decreases group cohesion, the opposite of what an Islamist armed group uses ideology for to begin with. Second, because those radical individuals are more interested in the proposed ideology than in actual group goals (power), they put ideology in front of military means. As a result, if they obtain influence over a group's military strategy, they make it less effective.

Third, the power to declare *takfir* (basically deciding who is an enemy and who is not) was once only a function of group leadership. But radical members of Islamist groups believe they do not need a sheikh (or any authority) to do that, thus depriving a group's leadership of its monopoly on a crucial aspect of group politics. According to one interviewed former ISIS chain *takfiri*, "Everything is written in the Quran and Sunna. But people are taught they cannot think or do anything without permission from their teachers, whom they aggrandize."

In the case of chain *takfiris*, the danger that those radicals present to group leadership is even more serious because declaring *takfir* basically becomes an algorithm. According to chain *takfiris*, if someone did not declare *takfir* on a *kafir*, he is a *kafir* himself—and so on. This circular logic does not allow for any discussion or legal hearing—before a sharia court or shura council—for the person being accused. The process could potentially allow for the manipulation from the side of the leadership, if there is a political or military necessity for that.

In particular, “acquaintance based on ignorance” was often used previously to excuse a person who should not be considered *kafir* for political (or other nonreligious) reasons. Now, because of the book *Ignorance Is Not an Excuse in Islam*, this option was explicitly rejected by excessive and chain *takfiris*. In one of his interviews widely distributed by pro-al-Qaeda websites, Ayman al-Zawahiri (senior member of al-Qaeda) said, “Shia civilians are excused because of their ignorance, and we just need to teach them the right [religious] way. And many Sunni [religious] scholars agree with me.” Yet one former ISIS chain *takfiri* did not hesitate to tell me that Ayman al-Zawahiri was wrong, that all Shia are *kafirs*, and those who do not agree are also *kafirs*. So in the case of chain *takfir*, leadership is not only losing power on a final decision, but it could not even affect the process because it essentially became automatic.

Fourth, these radical members of a group are also physically dangerous to group leadership. When they become dissatisfied with a group’s “moderate” leadership, they could physically challenge them because fighting *kafirs* was the reason they joined the armed group in the first place. And compared to other armed groups in the rebel bloc or the enemy, they are a group’s fifth column. They are already not only inside the group, but also often inside its headquarters in close proximity to a group’s leadership, and they could easily sabotage a group, causing enormous damage by sharing information with the enemy.

Finally, because excessive *takfiris* become a serious problem for the group, controlling them preoccupies a group’s leadership, taking time and resources away from the main goals of survival and military victory.

The inability to screen out radicals and control the spread of their ideology within a group makes them a grave danger for any Islamist group leadership. This danger is so grave that some influential people in the Islamist world—such as Abu Mus’ab As-Suri—have even blamed foreign intelligence agencies for spreading excessive *takfir* ideas.

Is it possible, then, for an Islamist, or any ideological, armed group not to fall into this trap, to make the problem manageable, or maybe even to extract some benefit from these individuals? In this chapter, I will compare the ultra-radical situation in ISIS with that of Jabhat al-Nusra, another group that also claimed Islamist ideology but managed to maintain relative control of their ranks. This chapter is based on interviews with members of al-Nusra and with former ISIS fighters, and online discussions with group leaders and members.

Fighting Excessive *Takfir*

Because of the problems I have outlined, scholars connected with al-Qaeda and ISIS are preoccupied with problems related to *takfir* and, in particular, how to return control of this dangerous weapon of ideology to group leadership. The problem is not only of chain *takfir* (the most radical way of declaring *takfir*) but also excessive *takfir* (declaring it without consulting religious experts or sheikhs), and almost all major scholars in the jihadi world have dedicated a significant amount of time to stopping such dangerous radicalization inside their ranks.

The majority of these scholars are approaching this problem from religious and popular standpoints by educating people inside their ranks. According to them, the rapid spread of this radical ideology stems from a lack of basic religious education. They propose an increase in lectures and religious leadership quality as the best solutions.

According to major al-Qaeda author Abu Mus'ab As-Suri,¹ the main strategy in the defense against any radical ideology is control and internal propaganda. He suggested that leaders of armed groups should (1) know their members' opinions in order to identify the illness before prescribing the treatment; (2) control books and other literature being circulated in the group; (3) have their own educated and well-spoken sheikhs to influence group members; and (4) provide members with classes and manuals that will clarify issues like *takfir*.

Low-level, non-excessive *takfiri* members of Islamist groups in Syria also share this opinion. In an interview, one Russian-speaking member of a group affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra said, "To prevent this problem and stop the destruction of a jihadi movement from inside, my advice for group leaders would be to educate their member." Some major jihadi authors have gone even further by preparing teaching material. Abu Muhamed al-Mahdisi wrote a hundred-page manual called *Thirty Points Cautioning Against the Extremism in Declaring Takfir*, which basically tells the reader that only sheikhs and religious scholars have the authority to declare *takfir*.

Other sheikhs approached the problem from a different side, trying instead to downplay the importance of *takfir* in religion and to distract group

¹ These points were taken from a 1996 article "Defense Against the Ideology of Extremism in Religion and *Takfir*," which was based on his experience in Afghanistan.

members' attention from the issue altogether. For example, Sheikh Abu Katada al-Philistini, in an article that was widely distributed online, said because there was no direct *hadith* related to declaring *takfir*, and old scholars did not produce major works on this topic, it was not important and did not deserve much attention.

Such deradicalization strategies worked for excessive *takfiris* who either never were fighting² or voluntarily left the battlefield. With time, some rejected the ideology of excessive *takfir* and returned to the more "moderate" ideology. One former ISIS foreign fighter who had briefly been a member of the chain *takfiris* remembered that, at some point after he left the group, he realized how strange the logic of chain *takfir* was, and he eventually distanced himself from this ideology.

At the same time, for other former ISIS chain *takfiris*, speeches and religious proofs rejecting their ideology did not have any effect most of the time. On the rare occasions that they did, discussions in the unit were only temporarily slowed down.

People join the chain *takfiri* sect because they feel that everything happens because of God's will, and they are afraid of him. Every chain *takfiri* former fighter I interviewed was absolutely confident that whether a fighter survived a battle or not was God's decision alone. According to them, "No matter how many risks you take, only God decides when a person will die."

Because of that fear, they feel that they must do "a little extra" to make sure they please him, and there are many aspects of religion where one could do a little extra. For example, in addition to the mandatory five prayer times a day, they do extra prayer at night. Despite that, for them the most important aspect of Islam is the idea of *takfir*, the reason they self-selected to come to Syria to fight *kafirs* in the first place. Because of that, when they decided that they need to do a little extra, it was natural to do it in the aspect of *takfir*.

And the longer those individuals are in combat, the more likely they are to turn to excessive if not chain *takfir*. For them, the closer their judgment day is (the more physical danger those people are exposing themselves to and the more likely they are to die), the more inclined they are to do this

² Many people who were excessive *takfiris* before the war in Syria did not join, and some who wanted to were not able to because they had burned their passports. (According to their teaching, having a passport is prohibited.)

extra, just to make sure they are truly following the religion and are on the safe side when the time comes.³

This fear of being “not in Islam” when killed can be illustrated by a text message exchange between one Russian-speaking chain *takfiri* former ISIS foreign fighter who is now outside Syria running a social media channel with religious lectures and a group of active fighters who were still in Syria (both originally from Dagestan, Russia). The following communication occurred in June 2017, a year after ISIS had lost 90 percent of its territory and all its major towns. There were only a few foreign fighters left alive, and they were not expecting to live much longer.⁴

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- Active Fighter: - *Assalamualaikum Wa Rahmatullahi Wa Barakatuh* [Peace be upon you, so may the mercy of the Allah and his blessings]. Brother, here all brothers are secretly listening to your lectures. If they would be found on our cellphones—that is it, we will be over.
- Former Fighter: - *Assalamualaikum Wa Rahmatullahi Wa Barakatuh* [Peace be upon you, so may the mercy of the Allah and his blessings]. Where are you now? In Mayadin?
- AF: - Along Euphrates in Syria. Mayadin is under *kafirs* for a long time. We are sandwiched in villages. *Kafirs* do not attack us and we do not move.
- ISIS is doing a cleansing inside the group, accusing everyone of being *khavarij* [excessive *takfiris*]. Even if you just make a mistake in what you say, everyone accuses you of being extreme in *takfir*.
- Brother, we could not leave and if something happens we do not want to die under *shubha* [doubt]. Nowadays many are doing *kufir* and do not even know about it.
- Brother, because of emotions all sorts of questions are mixed up in our heads.
- FF: - Can I ask one question first? Did you declare *takfir* on Abu Bakr Baghdadi personally?
- AF: - Some did, some did not. Those who did not say that they could not do it because they have not even seen him in person. And there are those who do not understand what is going on and say that they are fighting not for Abu Bakr Baghdadi.

³ In September 2018, after ISIS had already fallen in Mosul and Raqqa, a group of ISIS foreign fighters hiding in Azaz (on the border with Turkey) contacted chain *takfiris* via social media and said that while in hiding, they had listened to chain *takfiri* lectures, had accepted its ideology, and had declared *takfir* on themselves. Less than a week later, they disappeared.

⁴ Screenshots of this conversation were shared by a former ISIS foreign fighter who now lectures, and he agreed for them to be published. The original language of this conversation was poorly written Russian, so it has been shortened and modified for clarity.

- FF: - It is interesting. Then how are they listening to my lectures and not declaring *takfir* on him?
- This *mushrik* Baghdadi did not even say or do anything so that it is possible to think that he is in *Tawheed* [believing in one God]. He never distanced himself from any jihadist like Dudaev [Chechen leader during the first Chechen war] or Bin Laden. Even in general terms, he never said bad things about al-Qaeda or Emirate Kavkaz or the Taliban. ISIS declared *takfir* on al-Nusra only when they raised weapons against them but not for real *kufir*.
- AF: - Brother, can you explain to us what we do not know, based on the Quran and Sunna? We will accept with *daleel* [evidences], *inshallah*. There is a lot we do not know.
- We do not consider him Caliph. We understood it was *takfir* based on politics. Ayman al-Zawahiri did the same.
- Can you advise the brothers here?
- Brother, the situation is that people left their *katibas* [units] and everything was fine until those who left did not start declaring *takfir* on each other, ignoring obvious *kufir* at the same time. And there are those who did not leave *katiba* and are currently under *shubha*.
- FF: - If I know the answer to your questions, I will answer, and if I do not know, I will ask someone more knowledgeable. Is there a chance for you to leave Syria?
- AF: - No, brother. Ninety-five percent of us are being caught by Kurds. All the smugglers bring people right to the Kurds. We cannot not change our situation, and it is very expensive.
- Brother, can we be in contact with you to ask our questions? Here, brothers who have religious knowledge are terrified and will not answer us.
- If they answer, they will be caught and will disappear. Brother, we are very happy that we found you because our heads are exploding from our *shubha*. We cannot find middle ground. We do not want to be in *irjaa* [postponing the acts of belief], and we do not want to be in *ghulu* [excess in *takfir*].
- Not going to a mosque, not saying Salam in the *katiba*—all those things are being made known to ISIS, so they put people under surveillance, and break into their house and often brothers and sisters disappear.
- FF: - Brother, figure out who is next to you right now while you are on the phone with me [referring to Amni surveillance]. Everything else we could deal with later. It is not *kufir* to say *Salam* to *mushriks*, especially in your situation.
- AF: - If you declare *takfir* on ISIS, Amni becomes interested in you. We have very little territory now, so there is no way of hiding.
- FF: - Mingle with them and tell them *Salam*. In the worst-case scenario, go to the mosque and then redo your prayers at home, like Imam Ahmad used to do.

- AF: - We do not consider him Caliph and Muslim [referring to Bahdadi].
- FF: - The most important thing is to not help their *kufir* and leave the place of *kufir*. While such issues as saying *Salam* and eating meat killed by them knowing it is *haram* [prohibited], *inshallah* will be forgiven you based on *dalil* [evidences].
- The most important thing is not to do things that are against *aqida* [belief system]. Do not do each other *bara* [disavowal] because of the *Salam* to *mushriks*. Do not make issues of *haram* worse.
- AF: - It is exactly what is going on here now. Everyone is declaring everyone *bara* and *takfir*.
-

In addition, according to their understanding of *takfir*, it is declaring someone an enemy, which is a function of grievance. And the longer fighters are in combat, the more grievances they accumulate, and the more they will be looking for revenge. On one hand, that will lead to an increased reliance on a promised-by-religion punishment, especially if, through fighting, they are not able to inflict significant damage on the enemy. This can be seen in the continuance of the text message conversation:

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- FF: Do you know Ibrahim Abu Hadidja Shishani?
- AF: Shishani [Chechens] here are 90 percent Kadirovci [members of President Kadirov's army in Chechnya, but here it means people working for Amni]. They are catching brothers.
- FF: *Subhanalah*. They are the same everywhere.
- AF: Pagans!
-

During one interview, I asked a chain *takfiri* former ISIS foreign fighter if he would want Abu Jihad Karachai, a senior member of ISIS whom he blamed for his mistreatment in an ISIS prison, to be dead or tortured. He immediately replied that he wanted to see him dead because, according to him, "The suffering he will endure after death for what he had done will be incomparably more painful than anything that could be done in this life."

He then explained the particular temperature of fire in hell, something he enjoyed thinking about his enemy enduring.

Also, with an increase in grievance, fighters want revenge on not only their enemies but anyone associated with them. This leads to bending the requirements for declaring *takfir*, which leads to excessive *takfir*. According to Abu Mus'ab As-Suri,⁵ chain *takfir* ideas in Afghanistan were spreading due to the following: "Because the enemy uses unlawful arrests, beating, and excessive torture, and is disrespecting God and making fun of religion, brothers are inclined to think of governments, scholars, religious leaders, and torturers are one. They do not consider distinctions between them."

So in those circumstances, persuading excessive *takfir*s to return to a more moderate way of practicing religion, and in this particular situation *takfir*, is especially difficult if not impossible. Instead, with time in combat, they will constantly expand their declaration of *takfir* until they either die or demobilize.

Unfortunately for Islamist armed groups, there is little in religious teachings about the upper limits of dedication, a potential argument that could have affected excessive *takfir*s. According to a chain *takfiri* Sheikh I interviewed, it is even very hard to declare *takfir* on people who are more radical because they are not doing *kufir* unless "they go as far as to critique sahabah [companions of Prophet Muhammad], but it is very rare." Despite that, Islamic scholars continue to search for a religious boundary but have had little success. In his most recent book, Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi⁶ relates a story⁷ of one group that declared *takfir* on angels because of their *sujada* [worship] Adam, and declared *Iblis* [Satan] as believing in one God because he refused to do *sujada* to anyone except Allah. In other words, he comments, this group considered those whom Allah had declared to be unbelievers as Muslims, and declared *takfir* on those whom Allah had deemed Muslims. So they themselves committed *kufir* because they violated the text of the Quran. To my knowledge, there was little response to this argument from chain *takfiri* fighters.

⁵ "Defense Against the Ideology of Extremism in Religion and *Takfir*," 1996.

⁶ This excerpt is from the article "A Letter from Al Jafr [prison in Jordan]: Extremism in *Takfir* Leads to *Kufir*."

⁷ This story had been relayed to him by Abu Maryam Al-Azdiy, who in turn had heard it from fighters in Syria.

Radicalism in al-Nusra

Jabhat al-Nusra, another armed group in Syria claiming to have Islamist ideology, had a similar official position on *takfir* as ISIS. According to Order #17/6:

In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful,

1. For brothers in HTS [rebel coalition under al-Nusra leadership], it is prohibited to engage in questions of *takfir* [or] declare *takfir* on people and groups through social networks, on meetings, and in military bases.
2. Only special qualified individuals such as members of the Committee on Fatwas in Sharia Council can do so.
3. Anyone who will not follow this ruling, starting on the day of this publication, will be punished.

Emir HTS Al-Muhandis Hashim As-Sheikh

Jabhat al-Nusra, unlike ISIS, was more successful in avoiding major internal ideological disputes on this topic. While excessive *takfir*s endangered the very existence of ISIS and put into question the legitimacy of its leaders, in al-Nusra this problem was minor.

According to all of the local Jabhat al-Nusra fighters interviewed, problems related to *takfir* were not very common in the group. In fact, none of them had an opinion on excessive *takfir*, and they even asked us to explain what chain *takfir* was before they could answer the question. Only one local fighter (who was very close to French and Gulf foreign fighters)⁸ said that someone once mentioned it to him, but in his reply, it was apparent that he had, in fact, confused it with another *takfir*-related term and did not know about chain *takfir*.⁹

And although al-Nusra's foreign fighters were more knowledgeable than local fighters on the subject, there was nowhere near the level of awareness there was among ISIS members. According to one Russian-speaking foreign fighter in an al-Nusra affiliate group, there were a few people excessive in

⁸ He had an undergraduate degree in French, so he spoke it fluently, and before returning to Syria, he lived in Bahrain.

⁹ At some point during those interviews, it was not clear to me and my research assistant from an ethical point of view if we should keep asking all our subjects about chain *takfir*. When they did not know what it was, we had to explain it to them and thus were in danger of spreading chain *takfir* propaganda inside their group.

takfir, but he had not heard about chain *takfiris*. When a leader of Ajnad al-Kavkaz (another Russian al-Nusra affiliate) was asked about excessive *takfiris*, he said, “I do not know such brothers here. They are all far from here, in ISIS. Maybe we have several, but they are hiding their opinion on *takfir*.”

Because both Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS had the same Islamist ideology and both dealt with foreign fighters, it was very unlikely that members of Jabhat al-Nusra simply had not come across this issue of chain *takfir*. Not only did both groups’ foreign fighters share the same language and communicate with each other online, many (at least Russian-speaking foreign fighters) had started fighting together in the same groups before choosing between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. Also, since 2014, members of Jabhat al-Nusra smuggled many ISIS *takfiris* out of Syria and helped them escape. In some cases, ISIS chain *takfiris* spent several weeks on al-Nusra bases before crossing into Turkey. Al-Nusra fighters even complained that while the chain *takfiris* were living on their bases, they would not eat meat al-Nusra fighters had killed because the chain *takfiris* considered them to be kafirs.

At the same time, according to an ex-ISIS chain *takfiri* foreign fighter who left the group in 2015 and was very active in getting in contact with active foreign fighters in Syria to spread ideas of chain *takfir* “although I contacted many Russian speaking foreign fighters from al Nusra, they never got back to me”.

So why didn’t this chain *takfir* epidemic spread from ISIS to Jabhat al-Nusra? There were several differences between the *takfir* situation in Jabhat al-Nusra and the one in ISIS. And the major reasons for these differences lay in each group’s human resource policies in three main areas—recruitment, retention, and turnover.

Recruitment

First, Jabhat al-Nusra was very clear about its goals. It advertised itself not as ideological, but rather as a group fighting to topple Assad. Even comparing the names of two groups, this is obvious: the name ISIS highlights the group’s Islamist ideology, while Jabhat al-Nusra (“Victory Front”) emphasizes the main combat element of the group.¹⁰ According to

¹⁰ Later in the conflict, the group changed its name to Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, which means Levant Liberation Committee, also emphasizing the group’s primary military purpose.

Abu Mansour, “Al-Nusra was much more honest than ISIS about what it was doing and what its goals were.”

The groups also differed in their official positions on installing sharia rule in their territory. According to ISIS leaders, they would immediately establish sharia law on every kilometer of territory they conquered. Al-Nusra, on the other hand, claimed that talking about sharia law was possible only after a group had total control of the territory and the civilians were safe and provided for. These stances presented a clear difference in priorities. These distinctions were common knowledge in Syria, so when it was still possible to switch between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, foreign fighters who wanted to live in an Islamic state under sharia law went to ISIS, and those who wanted to fight Assad went to Jabhat al-Nusra.

According to one chain *takfiri* ISIS foreign fighter, as a member of Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar planning to leave the group, he and some friends visited sheikhs from ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra to find out what their main goals were and what they were doing about sharia. According to him, leaders of ISIS said they were there for jihad, to install sharia law, to liberate territory from Assad, and to build a caliphate. Leaders of al-Nusra said they were first there to liberate locals from Assad; after that, they would decide what to do next. To this, the chain *takfiri* responded: “The position of Jabhat al-Nusra, from the point of view of Islam, was absolutely unacceptable because it was obvious that locals were supporting democracy. So we joined ISIS.”

In addition, at the beginning of the conflict, the propaganda and mutual accusations of both groups helped foreign fighters decide between those two groups, which mostly benefited al-Nusra. Later, when fighters started switching between groups, the level of propaganda and mutual accusations increased. ISIS accused al-Nusra of cooperating with moderate groups, while al-Nusra accused ISIS of being *khavarij*, or too religiously radical. That clarified the ideological differences between the two even further, ensuring that all foreign fighters in the region were absolutely aware of who stood for what.

In general, Jabhat al-Nusra controlled recruitment by not accepting fighters (particularly foreigners) more interested in ideology than in defeating Assad. According to fighters, in the early days of the war, when there were many different independent foreign groups, Jabhat al-Nusra would not allow Umar Kuwaiti—already known for his radical ideology and position on *takfir*—onto their base in the Kafr Hamra suburbs of Aleppo.

A fighter stationed at that base said, “They allowed his students in, but not him personally.”

The seriousness of the situation could be illustrated by the following anecdote. Another foreign fighter remembers:

On our base we had very good Azeri trainers with Waziristan experience. At some point, someone accused them of spreading excessive *takfir* ideology. They got so pissed and the issue became so big that they collected all their belongings, left the base, and sat outside near the base entrance in protest. They were sitting there for several hours before a car came and picked them up. I do not know the details of how the issue was resolved, but in several day, leadership managed to get them back.

As a result, local Jabhat al-Nusra fighters were always, first and foremost, interested in fighting Assad rather than in participating in ideological debate. The majority of interviewed local Jabhat al-Nusra fighters recognized (and accepted) that although they had to follow Islamist-imposed rules to please the leadership, that was not the goal in itself. According to one local fighter, “In our brigade, we are not allowed to call a person *kafir*. As long as he prays and is willing to fight, then he is on our side.” Al-Nusra foreign fighters were also more interested in fighting and were not willing to get into conflict with local civilians and group members.

According to another local Jabhat al-Nusra fighter, “Joulani [a Jabhat al-Nusra leader] said in 2013 that we are against *takfir*, and I am with him on that. I also criticize the way ISIS is dealing with it—they are left with no friends.” Another fighter commented, “*Takfir* is just not useful right now. Let the Assad regime fall, and then everyone can choose their side.”

In addition, compared to ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra was mostly a Syrian group, which meant it would be exceptionally hard and potentially dangerous for them to declare *takfir* on locals the way that ISIS foreign excessive *takfir*is did. According to an interviewed local Jabhat al-Nusra fighter, “I don’t agree with what ISIS is doing because I still think that Syrians are Muslims in general, and they do not need someone to guide them in that.”

So when foreigners declared *takfir* on locals, locals turned away from them, and foreigners would not be able to continue fighting; indeed, their very presence in Syria would be questioned. And for those who are on terrorist list in their home country, leaving Syria would be a grave danger.

Retention

In the rare cases when Jabhat al-Nusra members declared *takfir* on each other, group leaders were much better at handling the situation than ISIS was, which helped prevent isolated episodes from escalating. One way Jabhat al-Nusra did this was to continually emphasize that its main goal was fighting Assad. Compared to members of ISIS who, after the declaration of a caliphate, turned to a relatively peaceful civilian life with time to participate in theological debates, al-Nusra fighters were too preoccupied with combat (and survival) to think about anything else. When speaking about purpose, one interviewed Jabhat al-Nusra fighter remembered part of a speech his leader had made to his unit about ideology: “We are not here to force anyone or anything. People are dying every day under Russian and Assad forces, and we will enforce only what is necessary. Islam is not a religion of hardship and enforcement.”

Jabhat al-Nusra also found a clever way to explain to foreign fighters why there were ideological misunderstandings between them and locals. While the ISIS argument to foreign *takfiris* was that they could not understand religious texts without an ISIS sheikh’s interpretation (a potentially offensive statement), Jabhat al-Nusra blamed ideological misunderstandings on the poor knowledge of Arabic among foreign fighters (a much less offensive statement). Here is a part of Jabhat al-Nusra’s Russian-language Q&A on *takfir*.¹¹

If you understand a particular question and answer, it does not mean that everyone else understands it the same way. So some things that seem *kufir* [unbelief] to you mean a different thing for other people. As a result, one cannot declare *takfir* without clarifying those differences. For example, the term *democracy*. Some people think it means the opposite of dictatorship. So when they say that they want democracy, they only mean they are against dictatorship. According to Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, “The words *democracy* and *parliament* are foreign to Arabic language, so many locals do not understand them properly. Some people think that they mean something opposite to unfairness, oppression, absence of law, and freedom.” So one could not declare *takfir* on someone until they are

¹¹ My translation of the document one Jabhat al-Nusra member shared with me.

clear that someone is for democracy because they want “rule of people” and not “rule of Allah.”

Another term, *ad-davlatu al-madani* [civilian country] means a country run by civilians as opposed to the military. So when some people say, “We want *ad-davlatu al-madani*,” they could mean something other than what you think [democracy and rule of people] is *kufir*.

Some foreign group members went even further and wrote an article, “*Muhajireen* problems in *dawat* [preaching] to the local population,” where they explicitly call for foreign fighters not to preach to locals before they master the language and local culture, and ask group leaders to organize such classes for new foreign fighters.

Although Jabhat al-Nusra leaders punished group members who declared *takfir*, they did not do so as radically as ISIS had and thus did not alienate excessive *takfiris* even further (as ISIS had). According to one interviewed Jabhat al-Nusra fighter,

Once, one of the people I know talked in a very bad way about another fighter, who had briefly gone to Turkey to see his family. He publicly called him *kafir* because the fighter supported Erdogan and the Turkish (secular) government, which allows gay parades and does not prohibit drugs or alcohol. When the military leader of our group heard about the accusation, he ordered the fighter I knew to be publicly punished. He got forty lashes on his back, and the punishment was carried out in the center of Idlib city.

Another fighter said that had also happened in his unit, and the fighter who had called another fighter a *kafir* was kicked out of the group.

Another local former Jabhat al-Nusra fighter remembered: “In the group, no one dared to call anyone else a *kafir*. If someone did it, there would be extreme punishment, like jail for a month or something.” Although such a sentence was considered extreme by Al-Nusra fighters, it was nothing compared to what ISIS meted out for extreme *takfiris*: a long prison term followed by capital punishment. In addition, it was such a rare event in al-Nusra that many fighters knew about it only from rumors. According to the same former fighter, “The people who were fighting before me told me they heard about a guy who was killed after he insisted another fighter within the group was a *kafir*.”

The upshot was that almost all levels of ISIS foreign fighters at least had an opinion on excessive and chain *takfir*, while in Jabhat al-Nusra, any ideological disagreements on the subject affected mostly senior members and looked very different. Although some al-Nusra fighters did put ideology in front of military necessity, their position on *takfir* did not endanger the group's leadership. According to a local former al-Nusra fighter, no one in his group ever declared *takfir* on a group leader—unlike in ISIS.

The main *takfir*-related discussions among Jabhat al-Nusra members were about the legitimacy of cooperating with secular (and, as a result, *kafir*) groups and countries, and not in relation to individuals, as in ISIS. For example, in 2017, some members of the shura council were questioning the legitimacy of the group's cooperation with secular Turkey. Before that, there had been similar disagreements about cooperation with a secular Free Syrian Army (FSA) group. But that was a minor problem that did not significantly affect the group and was settled among leadership. Here again, al-Nusra blamed the issue on a language misunderstanding as well as the media; by blaming language and the media, neither side was forced to admit a mistake and lose face. According to an al-Nusra memo on cooperation with other groups, shared with me by one of the group's members:¹²

According to Al Joulani, the Free Syrian Army is not one group but several groups branded with one name by the media. Those groups are not connected and do not have one leadership or ideology . . . So if one group did *kufr* and is working for *kafirs*, it does not mean that all groups labeled as the Free Syrian Army did the same and [the] *hukm* [decision] of the first group is carried to other groups.

Turnover

For fighters who turned to radical ideology while already in a group, Jabhat al-Nusra, in contrast to ISIS, allowed those not satisfied to leave the group. A fighter who decided that Jabhat al-Nusra was not the right ideological match for him could exit freely. This reduced the probability of internal conflict and alleviated the danger posed to leadership because people who were not satisfied could simply self-select out.

¹² The document was in Arabic and Russian, so I translated it from Russian.

However, losing those highly dedicated fighters meant losing valuable assets for advancing group goals. Even those fighters in the very beginning who left to join ISIS could have been used. So this posed a dilemma. Because, by definition, radicals are the most dedicated and risk-taking fighters, it was not strategically wise for the group to lose them. On the other hand, keeping them inside the group would be a potential danger to group leadership, as occurred in ISIS (see Chapter 7). So what was the best way to isolate those individuals and still maximize their military significance? The answer was to have Jund al-Aqsa,¹³ a small but more radical group, fight *alongside* the main group.

Al-Aqsa attracted fighters in the rebel bloc who were more radical than their previous groups. Instead of being dissatisfied with their previous group, such fighters peacefully self-selected into this group. Such a strategy helped al-Nusra avoid the mistake ISIS made of using its resources to search for and liquidate the ultra-radicals within the group, which alienated loyal fighters in the process.

Also, because al-Aqsa had different leadership, it did not endanger the mother group's leadership but was still dependent and under its control through funding. Al-Aqsa, according to activists on the ground, was the most radical rebel group in Syria. Abu Bakar, a leader of the Russian-speaking al-Nusra affiliate group Ajnad al-Kavkaz said, "If there were excessive *takfiris* somewhere in the rebel bloc, then most likely they were in this group."

This group, formerly known as Sarayat al-Quds, was once part of Jabhat al-Nusra, but even after separating, its leadership was closely related to that of al-Nusra. One of the al-Aqsa leaders, in fact, helped found al-Nusra in the beginning of Syria's revolution. And during its history, there were multiple times al-Aqsa formally pledged allegiance and signed cooperation agreements with al-Nusra. According to one former al-Nusra fighter, "There was a high level of coordination between al-Aqsa and us in the closed operations room."

This relatively small group was rarely noticed internationally.¹⁴ Its manpower never exceeded 2,500 people, compared to Jabhat al-Nusra's 20,000. In terms of ideology and goals, al-Aqsa positioned itself between ISIS and

¹³ In February 2017, the groups changed its name to Liwa al-Aqsa.

¹⁴ It is listed as a terrorist group only by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Saudi Arabia.

al-Nusra: the group was fighting Assad but eventually wanted to establish a state governed by sharia law.

Because Jund al-Aqsa was considered the most religiously radical group in Syria (sharing this position with ISIS) and the group most aggressively fighting Assad, it attracted both ultra-ideological fighters and fighters who believed al-Nusra was not fighting Assad hard enough. According to one al-Nusra fighter, “I do not know why, but foreigners in al-Aqsa loved Syria; they married local women and wanted to die here, while people who believed it was important to build an Islamic state all over the world switched to ISIS.” In the beginning, the group mostly consisted of foreign fighters, but as they were killed off in battle, the ethnic balance changed and Syrians become the majority.

Because they were ideologically in the middle, they did not participate in military operations against ISIS, and many al-Aqsa foreign fighters considered ISIS fighters their brothers. According to one al-Nusra fighter, “In 2015, there were several Saudis in Jund al-Aqsa who disobeyed their leadership and went on an operation against ISIS with Free Syrian Army groups. Unfortunately they were killed in the operation, and I have not heard of anyone else from al-Aqsa fighting against ISIS.”

Although in the beginning al-Aqsa was funded by rich individuals from Qatar, with time they lost this support and became one of the poorest groups in the rebel bloc. They mostly relied on spoils from battles and on support from al-Nusra for military supplies. Instead of a salary, al-Aqsa fighters only got food. Such poor financial prospects, in addition to their extreme ideology and heavy battle casualties, further ensured that only the most dedicated people chose to be in its ranks. The group did not offer any benefits while requiring enormous sacrifices both on the battlefield and in terms of restrictions associated with its ideology. And because al-Aqsa depended on al-Nusra for military supplies, the group was not in a position to operate independently and was easily controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra.

Because of its purpose, the group often chose the worst frontlines and the heaviest battles and were the most willing to conduct suicide operations. Fighters on the regime side confirmed that their most challenging enemy on the frontline was al-Aqsa.¹⁵ According to an interviewed former

¹⁵ Maxim Sobiesky, “Исповедь москвича, воюющего в Сирии Исповедь москвича, воюющего в Сирии” [“I Am Fighting on the Side of Assad, But I Do Not Want Him to Remain President.” The Confession of a Muscovite Fighting in Syria], *The Insider*, 2017, <https://theins.ru/confession/47414>.

al-Nusra fighter, “Members of al-Aqsa were really great and dedicated guys, but they were dying very fast.”

Jabhat al-Nusra used their willingness to die to its advantage. For example, in 2015, al-Aqsa helped al-Nusra win key battles in northwest Syria, and in the battle for Idlib, they aided the al-Nusra front by sending them two foreign suicide bombers of Kuwaiti and Saudi origin who struck Assad checkpoints. This allowed other fighters to enter the region, and within several days, Idlib completely fell to the al-Nusra–headed coalition HTS.

Al-Aqsa’s reliance on spoils of war gave them a very bad reputation among local civilians, as did their brutality. The fighters who had self-selected were volatile, and the group was often involved in harassing and killing civilians, including women and children. In October 2016, Jund al-Aqsa fighters tortured and killed a thirteen-year-old boy from the Idlib province who was overheard cursing God while playing with his friends.¹⁶ They were also accused of killing several leaders of moderate rebel groups.

That damaged their reputation in the rebel bloc even further, but because they were seen as an independent group, their negative reputation did not spill over onto al-Nusra either domestically (in terms of winning local hearts and minds) or internationally (in terms of obtaining donor support). In fact, al-Nusra further capitalized and improved its reputation by sometimes settling disputes related to al-Aqsa within the rebel bloc.

Despite those benefits, there were still several downsides to having such a group within the rebel bloc in general. Because al-Aqsa was so radical, sometimes its decisions were driven by ideology instead of military necessity, resulting in occasional clashes with other rebel groups. But even that was tolerated because of its effectiveness on the battlefield. Al-Aqsa soldiers still were trusted by rival rebel fighters, who referred to them as “the winning card” in every battle.¹⁷

While maintaining at least a degree of respect among fighters, opinions on the leadership level sometimes differed; for some, the group’s negative effects outweighed its benefits. In that case, al-Aqsa had to be protected by its mother group. In October 2016, almost every group in the rebel bloc,

¹⁶ Loubna Mrie, “What the Recent Infighting Between Islamist Groups Tells Us,” Syria Source (The Atlantic Council), Oct. 11, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/what-the-recent-infighting-between-islamist-groups-tells-us>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

including Ahrar al-Sham, issued statements about the desire to eradicate Jund al-Aqsa. However, al-Nusra was not willing to do that and, instead, accepted the group's allegiance.

A bigger problem occurs if a group such as al-Aqsa becomes dangerous to its mother group. That could happen if it increases in size and power, if its negative externalities outweigh its benefits, or if there is a disagreement about the war's goals. The only way to ameliorate such a danger is to dissolve the group and allow fighters to self-select where they want to go, thus dividing them into smaller groups. And in February 2017, under pressure from Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra had to disintegrate Jund al-Aqsa. The decision followed a chain of offenses in quick succession. On February 7, al-Aqsa clashed with Jaysh al-Nasr; on February 9, they captured several towns from other groups in the rebel bloc; and on February 13, there were heavy clashes between al-Aqsa and HTS, and al-Aqsa executed al-Nusra fighters along with local civilians. One week later, al-Aqsa ceased to exist, and fighters were allowed to self-select into another group. There was an agreement that part of the group (those more interested in Islamist ideology and living under sharia law) would be transported to Raqqa to join ISIS, and another part (those more interested in fighting against Assad) would be incorporated into the Turkish Islamist Party, another semi-independent al-Nusra affiliate fighting in the rebel bloc.

Although ultra-radical fighters were again mixed with those who were less radical, having being a member of Jund al-Aqsa signaled their personal ideology to leaders, making it easier to control them even inside of a mixed group. According to one al-Nusra fighter, having been in Jund al-Aqsa was an important signal for other groups. When he was asked if an individual could switch from al-Aqsa to any other group in the rebel camp, he said, "It would be much easier to go from Jund al-Aqsa to ISIS than to any other group. He will be definitely considered a betrayer of the revolution by them. He is better leaving to the group located far away geographically."

Conclusion

Losing control of the most dedicated and, as a result, most dangerous fighters is a grave concern for any group's leadership. And to avoid it, its human resource personnel should be ready to identify, face, and solve any problems associated with them.

First, a group should not misrepresent its true goals because it will attract people who will not be satisfied once inside. Second, if there are already radicals inside a group, the group should let them leave freely to prevent spying and sabotage and to head off internal fighting and disobedience to the leadership. As shown by ISIS, it is counterproductive to use force to identify and get rid of those people.

It is also counterproductive to let them just quit and leave. As shown by Jabhat al-Nusra's example, there is a more clever way to deal with them. By letting radicals peacefully self-select into an affiliate group, they can be both isolated and managed. This allows the mother group control while distancing itself from internal troubles. This affiliate group will also attract any future prospective fighters with the same ideology.

While it may seem this problem is faced and mitigated this way only by Islamist groups, it is not the case. When Israel was established, many immigrants from Europe were socialists. While the government of Israel was not socialist, they were allowed to build their closed utopian socialist communities (*kibbutzim*). This avoided a potential conflict for power between immigrants with different political ideologies.

American Mormons, who had at some point banned polygamy, soon started excommunicating those who still wanted to practice it. As expected, not all of the group's members agreed with this new official position, but instead of challenging church leaders, they separated into a separate organization and resettled in another area of the country. Although the official Mormon church does not consider members of this splinter group to be Mormons, the church still benefits because any Mormon who wants to practice plural marriage could join the splinter group instead of causing a problem within the mother organization.

9

Funding the Fight

Four years into the war, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) each had enough money to develop and fund long-term human resource benefits—such as healthcare and humanitarian aid—for their fighters. Conversely, most Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups were barely able to afford food. What created such a profound difference among the groups? Were some inherently blessed with funding, or did they simply get lucky?

No: they were neither blessed nor lucky. Instead, as with any other type of organizations, their financial success depended on the quality of their policies and decisions and, in this case, on their economic strategies. Without a successful budget strategy, groups could not fund and execute even the most meager human resource policies. While the majority of FSA groups did not successfully think through long-term financial plans, Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and ISIS did, and were able to invest in their manpower.

In this chapter, I look at why some groups had problems with their business model while others did not, what those problems were, how they affected each group's human resources, and how they could have been done differently. That will allow a better understanding of a major source of the human resource policy failures of some groups and the successes of others. I rely on interviews conducted with the leaders of several Syrian armed groups and other members influential in setting financial policy for their groups.

Financial Resources

Running an armed group was an expensive enterprise during the Syrian civil war. In 2013, for example, a very small group of ten people needed approximately \$230 per week just to survive—\$160 for fuel and \$70 for food,

not including expenses for weapons, ammunition,¹ and internet access. Therefore, group leaders had to constantly think about sources of funding.

Funding and funding sources were usually neither endowed nor permanent. Funding did not depend on the group's purported ideology and goals,² and different non-state actors acquired and expanded their financial resources in varying ways.³ As shown by previous research, armed groups obtain revenue by securing financial support from diaspora groups,⁴ building relationships with foreign patron states,⁵ exploiting natural resource wealth,⁶ or extracting money from civilians, either forcibly or in exchange for the provision of public goods. Those results are also confirmed by the al-Qaeda book *The Global Islamic Resistance Call* by Abu Mus'ab As-Suri. In particular, he mentioned the following sources that jihadi organizations depended on:

1. Contributions from members and close supporters in the beginning
2. Donations from local charities in the first stage
3. Donations from international charities after launching operations and announcing the confrontation with the enemy
4. Support from the neighboring governments that benefited from the jihad against the enemy government
5. Spoils of war.

¹ It is impossible to calculate the average amount of money needed for ammunition because that depended on the intensity of combat at a given time, which was almost impossible to predict or approximate.

² John Picarelli and Shelley Louise, "Organized Crime and Terrorism," in *Terrorism Financing and State Responses: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Harold A. Trinkunas and Jeanne K. Giraldo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39–55.

³ Sanin Francisco Gutierrez, "Telling the Difference: Guerillas and Paramilitaries in the Colombian War," *Politics and Society* 36, no. 1 (2008): 3–34.

⁴ Paul Collier and Anke Hoefler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (2004): 563–595. James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 01 (2003): 75–90; Nicholas Sambanis, "What is Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 6 (2004): 814–858.

⁵ Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, and David Brannan, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001).

⁶ Michael Ross, "The Natural Resource Curse: How Wealth Can Make You Poor," in *Natural Resources and Violent Conflict: Options and Actions*, eds. Ian Bannon and Paul Collier (World Bank, 2003): 17–42; Michael L. Ross, "What Do We Know About Natural Resources and Civil War?" *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (2004): 337–356; Macartan Humphreys, "Natural Resources, Conflict, and Conflict Resolution: Uncovering the Mechanisms," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 4 (2005): 508–537.

Table 9.1 Possible Funding Sources for an Armed Group in a Civil War

	Amount	Duration	Time to acquire	Distraction from fighting	Ethical considerations
Savings	Small	Short	Short	Small	None
Fundraising	Small	Short	Short	Small	None
Taxation	Small	Short	Medium	High	Medium
Profit-generating activities	Small	Short	Medium	Medium	None
Spoils (looting)	Medium	Short	Short	Small	High
Spoils (natural resources)	Large	Long	Long	Medium	Medium
Investors	Large	Long	Long	Small	None

Sources that, at the beginning of the conflict, groups did not consider desirable became so later, and vice versa. Also, while some sources of funding helped groups only temporarily, others provided longer-term solutions. As a result, groups had to rely on multiple sources of funding. Groups that had successful business plans were able to operate throughout the war, while others went bankrupt and folded (Table 9.1).

Savings

No interest is stronger than self-interest and the interest of one's family and friends. Therefore, much like civilian startups, an armed group first relies on its members' own savings and later seeks help from friends and family. While this type of funding takes the least amount of time to acquire and does not distract fighters from their main goal, it cannot sustain a group for very long. According to activists and fighters, the average group in Syria ran through all of its savings within the first year of combat.

Fundraising and Taxation

Civilian contributions to a group's budget can be either voluntary, when they support the fighting (fundraising), or involuntary, in the form of

forceful extraction (taxation). Voluntary donations by civilians are much like savings in that civilians are mobilizing for the same goal as the fighters, which makes them willing to support the group. In Syria, these civilians were people left behind in the war zone, or members of the diaspora who have deep emotional and family ties to their place of origin and shared the goals of the rebel groups.

Soon after most wars begin, local businesses usually shut down, foreign organizations pull out their capital, and governments becomes less willing (and able) to pay salaries to public-sector employees. As a result, the amount of money that can be collected by fundraising inside the war zone is limited; most civilians have either left or are struggling with rampant inflation. Also, many civilians left behind in the war zone are family members of fighters, so in this case, fundraising taps into the same pool as savings.

Fundraising in the diaspora can be slightly more productive because war does not always affect their income sources. Many Syrians who lived and worked in the Gulf countries started supporting various groups in their hometowns as soon as the war started. They sent money to people they trusted, who then provided the groups with what they needed (such as internet access, cameras, and gasoline).

This was still a temporary solution, however, because individuals rarely had enough money to support a sizable group over the long term. And even if they could afford it, they were rarely willing to do so because they were prone to lose interest in the war when it became too protracted. In addition, providing support to Syrian rebel groups soon became illegal in many countries.⁷

If civilians do not voluntarily donate money, armed groups might turn to extraction, using force to demand money and other valuables from them. In Syria, some groups collected a tax of between 1 and 10 percent of the gross resale price of goods, food, fuel, and aid that businessmen were transporting between towns. This served as a temporary solution despite the additional effort required.⁸

However, this financing method could negatively impact combat success. Saddling civilians with a heavy financial burden alienated them from the

⁷ Gulf countries introduced a new law making it illegal to support terrorism during the Syrian conflict, significantly decreasing the amount of money being transferred to different armed groups in Syria.

⁸ The group needed to collect information about individuals and track people down, even going so far as canvassing towns to find “taxpayers” and punishing or imprisoning those who refused to pay.

armed group. In fact, some civilians in Syria collaborated with the enemy by spying on checkpoints, taking photos of rebel fighters (to get them arrested), or simply withholding critical information from the group, which could endanger it. Because of this, many groups did not resort to tax collection and tried to stay on friendly terms with civilians.

One member of the Bait al-Maqdes group explained, “We don’t really interact with civilians. We help them from time to time by giving them rides home. In exchange, they have to keep our headquarters locations secret.” A member of al-Muhajireen Ila Allah group also recalled, “Our leader did a great job asking families and sheikhs for their opinions, even about where to fight.” In addition, many groups made it a policy to not harm the civilian population, and they also monitored the behavior of individual members, immediately kicking out anyone who abused civilians.

Profit-Generating Activities

To raise money, a group could start a non-combat-related business and funnel profits into supporting combat. This does not produce a surge in capabilities, but it does help keep operations afloat while the group searches for more substantial and permanent sources of funding. In addition, running a for-profit business would be very distracting for a group because some members would constantly have to work in and on the business. However, there were groups that did it.

In Deir Ezzor in 2012, one twenty-five-person group ran out of ammunition. To raise money to buy bullets, the fighters sold seven of their weapons to another group and bought a car. Then they started buying oil from the oil-rich Deir Ezzor countryside, used the car to bring it to Aleppo, and resold it for twice the price. The income generated allowed them to continue fighting for several more months until Jabhat al-Nusra took over the area and confiscated the car.

Other trade-related businesses included bringing food from the countryside to resell in urban areas, fixing and flipping cars, and even exchanging foreign currency. Many groups also had success in running service-related businesses. In Hama, a thirty-member group used its leader’s mechanic shop to generate money for combat. These funds allowed them to function for three months before government forces took control of the territory. Some groups even opened businesses outside of the war zone: several

groups owned restaurants and shops in Turkey that group leaders regularly visited to supervise. Other groups provided security to local factories and warehouses. One group in Deir Ezzor made an agreement with a local council that the group would get 20 percent of oil sales for protecting the refinery that belonged to the city administration.

However, some groups decided that legal ventures were not profitable enough and turned to illegal activities. The most common illegal activity in Syria was reselling weapons. In one case, a group bought weapons in Aleppo (where access to weapons was easier) and resold them in more remote parts of the country. In a more extreme case, two groups in the countryside of Idlib province reportedly funded their combat activities by growing marijuana to sell internationally.

Spoils of War

A group could try to temporarily support itself by looting and selling the spoils of war, but the income generated that way was not sustainable and decreased over time.

In the Syrian war, all groups had a shared policy: any assets collected during battle usually went directly to a group's warehouse and became collective property. A fighter could not take anything for himself. Fighters who disobeyed would be accused of stealing and kicked out. As members of the Jund al-Haramain group recalled, "The group does not allow fighters to use anything they get from the battlefield (money, weapons, and such). They have to bring it to the group's headquarters, and only the leader can decide what to do with it next." ISIS had a similar policy: everything taken in the operation had to be brought to the organization, and for everything smaller than a heavy machine gun, ISIS would later pay fighters the equivalent to what they took.

Natural Resources

Groups could also generate funding by gaining control of natural resources, which could result in significant and long-term profit. However, even if natural resources exist and groups take control of them, fighters may not always be able to mine them. At the very beginning of the conflict, a number

of groups thought that running an oil extraction operation would be too complicated. But later, when they saw people without prior education and experience successfully extracting oil, many started turning their attention toward it.⁹

This funding option, however, required a lot of manpower and was a major distraction from fighting. As fighters in Deir Ezzor city recalled, “We saw what was going on in the oil-rich countryside: people would sell oil rather than fight. If we start getting into the oil sector, we would forget to fight.” Sometimes fighters considered this sort of profit-generating activity unethical. When asked, “What was the good thing about your group compared to others?” one member of a group from the Deir Ezzor countryside replied, “The best thing about my group was that we did not steal oil like all the other groups did.”

Investors

Foreign investment can also serve as a source of funding. Investors are different from donors: donors are interested in supporting a group’s goals without expecting anything back, while investors are trying to advance their own interests.

In the business world, when a high-tech startup needs money to continue operating or for a major expansion, it seeks investors for funding. The leaders present their goal, business plan, team, and product for review, and if a venture capitalist is interested and thinks that investing will be profitable, he or she provides the money. This is the stage where most businesses fail. If they cannot secure investments, they fold.

Armed groups in a civil war behave similarly. After spending all of their startup capital, they ask outside actors for help, presenting them with their group’s goals and capabilities, and interested parties fund them. Similar to the startup market, however, most groups cannot secure outside investors.

This form of funding is a long-term solution. In addition to generating a significant amount of money, it also builds connections (lobbying) and secures technology (modern weapons and communication technology) and expertise (military consultants and strategists). More importantly, it

⁹ Learning how to refine oil took most groups an additional two years to master.

does not involve any distraction from fighting and does not raise moral questions. As a consequence, fighters prefer this source of funding the most. When focus group participants were asked, “What was the main disagreement between fighters and commanders in your group?” virtually everyone mentioned outside investor funding. “The dispute has always been about one point: the group commander had to find good outside supporters that share our goals,” said one fighter from the al-Khadra group. “The disagreement has always been that our leader had to go to Turkey to meet the coalition and potential foreign supporters,” said a fighter from an anonymous group in Deir Ezzor. A fighter from another Deir Ezzor group said, “Our battalion commander’s relationship with funders was the focus of a dispute between him and some of the fighters.” “The group leader couldn’t find better support for the group,” said a fighter with Bait al-Maqdes. A fighter with Al-Zahraa mentioned “collaborating with the military council to get outside support.”

Financial Strategy

Given the limited number of possible sources of funding, what is the best portfolio for an armed group? There is no one right answer; it depends on the group’s time horizon, or how long it plans to operate. The leaders of a civilian organization look at the experiences of other similar enterprises and its own capabilities and estimate its time horizon: how much time will be needed to develop a product, how much time will be needed to advertise it, and when a profit can be expected. Based on this timeline, leaders develop an annual budget, taking into account all possible revenues and potential expenses they could expect.

Armed groups also need a clear understanding of their time horizon, in this case how long the war will last. An optimal business strategy in one case is not going to work in another. A strategy that could make group operations effective in the short run will not work in the long run, and vice versa.

Not all Syrian armed groups arrived at similar calculations, which resulted in wildly different economic behavior. While some groups were preparing for a short, localized conflict, others were getting ready to fight a protracted, full-scale war. And since the war in Syria proved to be the latter, groups that from the very beginning had prepared for such an extended war were able to build a sustainable business model. Groups that relied on

short-term organizational strategies were much less successful and had to disband when they ran out of money. According to local activists, at the beginning of the revolution, the majority of civil war startups were confident that Assad would be ousted within a matter of months.

While the majority of armed groups that proved unsuccessful in the long term were looking for ways to get quick money with the least distraction from fighting, a few groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and ISIS, used their time to secure long-term funding sources. They were preparing to run a marathon, not a sprint. As a consequence, four years into the war, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham were increasing in power and absorbing fighters from moderate groups that had to drop out of the race, and ISIS was able to satisfy its members' constantly increasing demands. This difference in financial planning among groups could be observed in terms of both generating income and managing expenses.

Spending

At the beginning of the war, many groups (especially groups that organized for the political aspirations of their leaders and were getting funding from outside of Syria from the very beginning) were spending money on luxuries or had simply miscalculated. Unnecessary purchases included laptops, expensive cameras, cars, and eating out on a daily basis (even when they had their own kitchens). Some leaders were vacationing in Turkey—flying business class and renting expensive houses in Istanbul or luxury hotels. The leader of one of the largest groups distributed salaries not only to his fighters on payday but to everyone who happened to be in the room, commenting, “You are here with us, so you are also working for the revolution.” He was confident that since his group had money at the time, it would continue to be well supplied until the end of the war. Soon after that episode, the group had to disband because it lost its funding.

Another group mostly bought AK47s to arm fighters guarding checkpoints and fertilizer to make TNT explosives to prevent enemy tanks from entering neighborhoods. It had not occurred to them that they might need long-range weapons (such as sniper rifles) or lots of ammunition. Later, they had to sell all of their AK47s to buy a sniper rifle (because there were none in the city) and bullets. While fighters could make do with one rifle for several men by operating in shifts, it was of no use without

ammunition. As a result of those transactions, the group lost even more of its much-needed money.

Moreover, groups failed to save any money to cover future needs but instead spent it as soon as they received it.¹⁰ As one person who attended the financial meetings of one of the groups recalled, “Every time additional money turned up, the leader and someone in charge of finances would come together and redo the budget for the next week.” Basically, instead of making one long-term plan, groups executed short-term plans several times.

Income

Since most groups did not expect the war to last very long, they did not start looking for long-term funding until it was apparent that they needed it. As a result, they concentrated on short-term funding sources, like personal savings and spoils, until they went bankrupt. Only when they had spent those short-term resources and had literally run out of bullets did they start looking for longer-term solutions, such as natural resources or foreign investors to bail them out. But by this time, these groups did not present a good opportunity for a prospective investor. Just like in regular industries, a startup should seek out investors when it is at its peak performance, not on the brink of bankruptcy, in order to secure better terms and options. Even if groups in a compromised position were able to find outside support, they were not in a position to negotiate a good deal for themselves.

Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, on the other hand, took control of long-term resources, namely oil fields, and developed logistics from the very outset to sell oil. At that time, it was also relatively easy to do so, since few groups were interested in natural resources. They also anticipated that other groups would eventually try to enter the oil market, so they had to find a way to prevent potential competition. While ISIS had enough manpower to monopolize the oil trade by force, Jabhat al-Nusra did not and had to find other ways to accomplish its goals. Al-Nusra fighters took control of a major refinery near Deir Ezzor, which allowed the group to produce high-quality refined oil and sell it for a fraction of the going market price. By the time

¹⁰ Armed groups had no problem with physically storing the money for future use. Usually it was stored in a secured room either in the leader's house or in the group's headquarters, with an armed guard present around the clock.

other groups became interested in oil, the oil market in the area was already monopolized, leaving them unable to compete with al-Nusra. Although some groups were still extracting oil and reselling it in remote towns in Syria and abroad, their operations were minor and posed no serious threat to Jabhat al-Nusra.

Al-Nusra's long-term thinking was evident not only in how the group acquired major income sources such as oil, but even in minor income-generating activities such as looting. While the majority of groups targeted factories (to resell equipment and obtain immediate revenue), Jabhat al-Nusra leaders went after items that were hard to buy but could help them achieve their goal. For example, at the very beginning of the conflict, Jabhat al-Nusra was reported to have taken control of a significant number of buses and twelve ambulances in Aleppo, a move that at that time looked useless if not ridiculous. But it proved to be very helpful in the long run when groups had to start thinking about medical care and logistics.

ISIS went even further: before taking control of major cities in Iraq, the group conducted economic espionage. Before taking Mosul, ISIS had people even in the Mosul Museum, which they eventually looted. According to museum director Raya Unus, before ISIS took control of the town, the museum had hired a suspicious laborer who was likely collecting information on where the most expensive artifacts were stored.

Why was the difference between how groups approximated their time horizons so pronounced? First, many startup groups simply did not know how to make this calculation. They either had no experience in other civil wars or did not apply it to their situation. Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, as al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations, on the other hand, had previous experience with civil conflicts and went into the Syrian conflict expecting a protracted war. The following portion of a recorded lecture given by Abu Mus'ab As-Suri in 1999¹¹—and known by many in al-Nusra—gave an example of the financial planning and consumption mistakes made in Afghanistan:

When we came to Afghanistan in 1987, and until 1990, the whole world was offering money to people who were coming. Saudi reduced the prices of air tickets, Sheikh Abdullah Azzam gave money, Sheikh Osama Bin Laden gave money, and some countries gave money. A lot

¹¹ This lecture, given in Afghanistan, was translated into different languages and widely distributed among Jabhat al-Nusra and its supporters when the war in Syria started.

of organizations, training camps, and movements were open. When the international community decided to close camps and stop the Islamic movement in Afghanistan, financing stopped. *Mujaheed* that previously could have gotten everything to come to Afghanistan now had to beg for money in mosques to afford a ticket back home. Some of them did not have money even for food.

Second, conflicting statements and strategies from major foreign powers and international actors compounded the confusion on how long the war would last. At the beginning of the war, fighters recalled, most groups were counting on foreign intervention, thinking they only needed to hang on for a short while before the international community would intervene. But even if the international community had intervened, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS did not expect to benefit from it. Quite the opposite: as al-Qaeda affiliates, they would have been worse off. Thus, their only option was to rely only on themselves.

Third, since the majority of fighters were emotionally driven, many groups had problems thinking rationally about planning. Members of the group Soqoor Idlib recalled a major disagreement with their commanders: “When the regime attacked Ghouta with chemical weapons, we all wanted to go to Damascus and attack the regime’s military base with all the weapons and ammunition we had. Since it would definitely have been a strategic disaster, our commander did not allow us to do that.”

Finally, there was the power of simple wishful thinking (predicting a more favorable outcome)—which cannot be underestimated, even in the context of a civil war. When one has a strong preference toward an outcome, one is more likely to think that the chances of this outcome are higher than they actually are.¹² Fighters wanted the war to end as soon as possible, so they processed information in a way that led them to think that the war was indeed drawing to a close. Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, on the other hand, steered clear of that thinking trap, thanks to previous experience, and were therefore able to make more rational decisions.

The Management of Savagery, considered one of al-Qaeda’s manuals, explicitly warns about such events: “As for rushing, the prescription for it is understanding and sitting with the youth and clarifying the general policy

¹² Elisha Babad and Yosi Katz, “Wishful Thinking—Against All Odds,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 21, no. 23 (1991): 1921–1938.

for action and the importance of biding one's time in some of the stages of the battle in order to drain the enemy, for example."

While several groups in the rebel camp were looking for long-term funding sources from the beginning, most were instead looking at how to get money faster and with the least distraction from fighting. Later on, only a minority of those groups managed to secure long-term funding (either through natural resources or foreign investment) after short-term options dried up. The majority of moderate groups that started with short-term funding had to disband or merge into groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, which were more successful in developing a financial strategy. This can be illustrated by an account of one group leader, whose story was a very common one in Syria four years into the war.

At the beginning of the war, a twenty-year-old auto mechanic from Hama organized a group. Although he did not have any prior military experience, he decided to assemble his friends to protect his neighborhood, al-Hader. They set up checkpoints at the neighborhood entrance to keep government forces from entering. From his four years of full-time employment, he had saved up enough money to buy several light weapons (AK47s). Using the internet, he learned how to make TNT explosives at home from easily available materials.

As time went on, his group's everyday expenses increased, and his savings were running out. Before the war, he had owned an auto body shop, and for some time after, while the war was still slow, the income his business was generating covered his group's expenses. During that time, he had already started looking for a potential buyer for his business, so he could get enough money to step up his group's activities and take on even more fighters. While he was looking for a buyer, his mother, a math teacher, volunteered to sell her gold and raised around \$4,000 for his group. This allowed him to increase the size of his group from ten to thirty-five fighters. With more members, his expenses increased even further, but by that time, he had been able to sell his body shop, and the group had enough ammunition to continue fighting. All of their expenses were direct combat-related expenses (e.g., ammunition, gas, weapons); because they were still based in their neighborhood, they could continue living at home and relying on their parents and wives for food.

During Ramadan in 2011, Assad's forces entered Hama. The group was forced to leave the town and relocate to the countryside. Although his mother's gold and selling his business generated enough liquid assets to

last the group almost a year, the group members soon found themselves cash-strapped. They needed a place to stay, more expensive weapons, and even medicine, since more and more of them were getting wounded. During their military operations, from time to time they won spoils of war (mostly weapons from enemy positions), but this was negligible: by that time, government forces were very careful to take everything with them when evacuating their bases. The group members did not sell all the weapons they got from the enemy but rather used them for the needs of the group. By then, the only option they were left with was to look for investors.

First, they were able to find some wealthy members of the Syrian diaspora living in the Gulf countries (Kuwait and United Arab Emirates) and Lebanon, who started funneling them money through Turkey. That lasted for six months until the investors realized there was no end in sight for the conflict; also, international and national laws made sending money harder. As a result, the group had to look for international state investors. Qatar and Kuwait offered them money and experience from foreign instructors. That allowed them to operate for one more year, but even that was not enough to make them a significant actor on the battlefield, and soon that funding also dried up.

The remaining fighters had to make a decision: Should they continue to struggle and look for funding, give up, disband and leave, or merge with a larger group? Although some people left, the group leader, with some other members, joined Ahrar al-Sham to continue fighting. This switch into a leading group enabled them to get even more professional training and continue fighting while eliminating their constant concerns about finding finances. When Ahrar al-Sham experienced difficulties and temporarily slowed down its fighting activities, some fighters who wanted to continue fighting on the frontline moved even further to the right—to Jabhat al-Nusra.

In the interview, this man acknowledged that “when you are in need of money and ammunition, the name of the group is the last thing you think about. My men did not care about the flag; they cared about their city of Hama, which they were forced to leave. When we were in Hama, we did not need that much money. We ate in our houses. But after we left, we needed more money to support the men and keep the base running. Also the battles became more intense. It took me no time to decide. This is a war and we don’t have the privilege to wait and make the best decision. And today, four

years later, I still don't regret it. I did what was best for the group, and we are successful in combat."

Unexpected Consequences of Poor Financial Planning

In addition to problems stemming from ineffective and shortsighted financial policies we have mentioned, there was also an unexpected side effect: the ethical bar for funding sources was also slipping. That in turn alienated the civilian population and international community and created a bad reputation for groups, which further decreased their chances of securing outside investment and boosting recruitment.

As time went on, groups started running out of options to generate short-term income, yet the nonmaterial goal of defeating Assad was still strong. As a result, groups increasingly turned to relying on war spoils, and, as a consequence, the moral bar for collecting spoils was also lowered, and groups had to rationalize their acceptability. Most often, their rationales were rooted in either the idea of depriving the enemy or in following religious teaching. In fact, a lot of attention was dedicated to communicating the rationale for acquiring particular spoils to the local population, which was according to general guidance published in al-Qaeda manuals.¹³

In addition to different levels of ethical acceptability, loot differed in the amount of money that selling it would generate. While looting empty houses would not be very profitable, looting museums and selling the artifacts to rich private collectors could significantly enrich a group, allowing them to buy more expensive and sophisticated weapons, which would immediately give them a distinct advantage on the battlefield.

Type	Order	Reasoning
Weapons	1	Depriving enemy
Banks	2	Depriving enemy
Businesses	3	Depriving enemy

¹³ According to the book *Management of Savagery*, "We know that the Islamic group failed in confronting the media distortion, which was directed towards it when it attacked tourism and banks Therefore, the first step in putting our plan in place should be to focus on justifying the action rationally and through the sharia and (to argue that) there is a benefit in this world and the next (for undertaking the plan). Second, we must communicate this justification clearly to the people and the masses such that any means or attempt to distort our action through the media is cut off."

Type	Order	Reasoning
Museums	4	Religious reasoning
Houses	5	Depriving Enemy
Kidnappings	6	Depriving Enemy

At the beginning of the war, stealing and selling enemy military equipment and weapons was allowed because depriving the enemy of its assets is one of the war's goals. An AK47 found on an enemy base could be sold for \$700 to \$1,900 (depending on age and country of origin), but most often, groups preferred to keep those weapons for their own use.

Once Assad's soldiers learned to take everything with them before abandoning their bases, banks and businesses became targets. The rationale for plundering banks was that, as fighters said, banks and most rich businessmen in the country were also affiliated with Assad, and stealing *their* property was like robbing Assad himself.

Before the war, Aleppo used to be an industrial center of Syria where many factories were located, representing textile, chemical, pharmaceutical, and agricultural processing industries. When the war started, some groups offered to help provide security for those factories for a fee. While some businessmen paid, other factories were looted. Similar cases, although on a lesser scale, happened in other towns. One of those cases took place in May 2013, when expensive machinery was stolen from a major sugar factory in Deir Ezzor and resold overseas. That same year, some groups robbed a bank in Raqqa and stole the Syrian equivalent of \$500,000. The bank and the factory had been there since before the conflict and could have been targeted anytime, but both of these incidents happened in 2013—two years after the beginning of the full-scale conflict—because the rebel groups had run out of other funding sources.

After all factories and banks shut down, robbing museums also became acceptable for fighters. Since museums represent a country's history and belong to the people, it was harder to rationalize this activity by claiming it harmed the enemy, so groups found a religious rationalization: according to some interpretations of Islam, pictures and statues were prohibited, so getting rid of them was deemed a good thing.¹⁴

¹⁴ They based their rationale on the following quotes from hadith: "He it is Who shapes you in the wombs as He wills" [Aal 'Imraan 3:6] and "O man! What has made you careless about your Lord, the

In 2013, a relatively large group was in control of a border crossing into Turkey. They were against looting museums, reasoning that war does not justify destroying a country's heritage. They would stop cars and search them to make sure nothing was being smuggled out of Syria. Their resolve, however, proved to be short-lived: they also ran out of money, turned to smuggling cultural treasures themselves, and were even forced out of their own checkpoint over their ethical compromise.

Even as late as the fourth year of combat, individual houses were generally still avoided by most groups as targets, since fighters claimed that they belonged to civilians who were also suffering at the hands of the enemy. However, the actual reason was most likely that doing so was strategically counterproductive: there was simply not much to take from civilian houses. One member of a group in Deir Ezzor responded to the question, "Compared to other groups, what was good about yours?" with "We didn't loot the homes of civilians who left the city like some other groups did."

In rare cases, even some not-for-profit rebel groups looted homes as a last resort. For example, when an FSA affiliate group in the Yarmouk camp near Damascus (at that time one of the most destitute areas in Syria) ran out of food, they went to abandoned houses in search for food items. In the whole camp, they only found enough rice to last for couple of days. Some relied on religion to morally justify their behavior,¹⁵ while others rationalized looting empty civilian houses as a means to "deprive the enemy," saying that the owners were pro-Assad, and that was why they had left when rebel forces took control of the neighborhood.

In Mosul, ISIS also started indiscriminately looting houses and taking valuable belongings such as jewelry and gold when Iraq started an operation to retake the city in 2016. According to a civilian who was briefly arrested by the group, when he was released from prison in 2014, ISIS returned all his belongings to him, including an expensive sports watch with a GPS.

At the same time, some groups turned to kidnapping locals and, if possible, foreigners for ransom, often accusing them of spying. Groups would do research on how much a family of a particular person was able to pay,

Most Generous? Who created you, fashioned you perfectly, and gave you due proportion. In whatever form He willed, He put you together" [al-Infitaar 82:6-8], among many others.

¹⁵ They referred to the narrative by Ibn Kathir (*rahimullah*) in his *al-Bidayah w'l-Nihayah* (4:99) that the Caliph 'Umar b. al-Khattab (*radhy Allahu 'anhu*) decided not to establish the prescribed punishment (*hadd*) for theft upon those who had stolen any food during the Year of Famine, saying, "The hand is not severed (in the cases of) taking from a tree and famine."

and then demand that amount. In some cases, group members would tell a hostage they had nothing against him personally but just needed money.

With the ongoing war, many desperate moderate groups got involved in looting, while groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, who had stable, sustainable funding, did not have to. As a result, while other groups started losing the local population's enduring support, Jabhat al-Nusra started gaining it. This in turn not only increased their battlefield strength but also made membership in the group more prestigious for fighters, which further boosted their recruitment.

Conclusion

A recent economics study showed that there are five main reasons why business startups fail: no market demand; lack of cash; wrong team members; were outcompeted by other companies in the market; and need/lack of a business model. By definition, Syrian armed groups started when there was market demand for their product—fighting Assad—so they did not face the first problem, but they were not immune from the other four.

While some groups had a clear, long-term financial plan, others did not have any business model or had a fundamentally flawed one. While successful groups were looking for long-term funding sources, the majority of unsuccessful groups were trying to get fast cash with the least distraction from fighting Assad, and this tactic rarely worked. As a result, only a minority of groups managed to secure long-term funding (through either natural resources or foreign investment) after their short-term funding options dried up.

Most groups in the rebel camp made decisions based on their assessment that the war would not last long, and thus failed to secure longer-term funding sources. Before long, their short-term sources ran out, they went bankrupt, and they were forced to disband. Counterintuitively, according to local activists, more groups ceased to exist because of economic hardship than because of military defeat. When a group was being dealt a decisive blow on the battlefield, they would regroup and retreat to another area, where they would continue fighting. But if they had financial problems, they would disband and their remaining fighters would be absorbed by other groups. Groups that counted on a prolonged conflict from the very beginning started more slowly because investing in long-term funding

sources took time and effort. However, they were the groups that were more successful later on in the war when very little competition remained.

Getting this time horizon right had two major impacts on a group's human resource management. First, because such groups had more funding, they had more freedom to invest in their fighters. They were able to pay for a fighter's salary, medical expenses, and humanitarian needs, so the group became more popular with fighters who were switching from failed groups that had to disband.

Second, having a successful financial plan also allowed groups to become more popular with the civilian population. They won their hearts and minds and, as a consequence, increased their reputation. In contrast, groups that did not secure long-term funding sources and struggled to rely on the constantly decreasing short-term sources were soon forced to compromise their ethical standards to continue functioning. This caused a surge in human rights violations and civilian abuse.

So while weaker groups relied on sources of funding such as forceful taxation and extraction, the wealthier groups not only avoided ethical gray zones but also were able to defend civilians from other less scrupulous groups and further expand their support base. For example, Jabhat al-Nusra and several other groups were in a position to provide bread to civilians, enforce the rule of law, and even repair roads. For Ramadan in 2015 in Aleppo, Jabhat al-Nusra even sponsored kitchens to prepare *iftar* meals with all the traditional foods—even chicken—for the community. Such behavior further increased the popularity of these groups among prospective members and the prestige of those who were already fighters. As a result, those groups were not only able to increase their ranks, but also had the luxury of choosing the best people to join since the supply of applicants exceeded the demand.

10

Rebel CEOs and Managers

In previous chapters, I have discussed some of the problems experienced by armed groups in Syria, mainly centered around poor financial planning and short-sighted human resource strategies. But their most important and fundamental problem was not having the right people in the right places doing the right job in leadership positions. For example, no organization can have effective policies if it does not have someone with the right qualifications to design them, and even the most brilliant plans will not work if there is no one capable of executing them.

Even low-level fighters understood the importance of leadership. In a survey, 58 percent of active fighters said leadership was crucially important for them in choosing a particular group to join. For many fighters, following a leader was one of the reasons they switched groups.

In this chapter, I look at why some groups managed to have qualified leaders while others did not. In particular, I will examine who the top-level and midlevel leaders of armed groups were, how they were chosen, and what made them effective. Evidence for this chapter is based on qualitative interviews with leaders and other members of armed groups in Syria and Turkey.

Top-Level Leadership Selection

Like any other organization, armed groups are not immune to organizational and management problems,¹ which usually are functions of a group's leadership. Ideally, leaders are selected based on their experience and knowledge, and could be either promoted from within the organization or

¹ Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

brought in from the outside. But in many cases, the reality of selection is very different, especially in civil war settings.

There are two main factors of leadership selection in any organization. First, an organization needs to choose the **best** candidate from the best pool of qualified candidates possible. Second, there must be an optimal, noncorrupt selection process in place to ensure the best choices are made from that candidate pool. Both of these factors were an issue in Syria, with the relative importance of each factor fluctuating with time.

In the very beginning of the war, the main leadership problem for the local armed groups was the pool of potential candidates: in general, it was small and shallow. Because there were no resources involved, there were no incentives for a fighter to step up and take a leadership position. Everyone was more interested in taking up a weapon than in performing managerial tasks. This goes back to the reason most local fighters joined to begin with: to satisfy their grievance and desire for revenge by personally inflicting as much costly damage on the enemy as possible. “I want to be like those guys who killed Kaddafi,” one interviewed fighter said. “I want to kill Assad with my own hands.” And, according to local activists, even those with military experience (army defectors) often refused to lead a group, although for them it was because of the lack of resources and absence of a clear revolutionary vision.

In addition, because there obviously were no employment agencies (as there are for other industries) that matched leaders with groups, each group had to rely on personal contacts to search for potential leaders, which made it harder to increase the pool of outside applicants. Although members of the al-Zahraa group in Deir Ezzor mentioned that they invited in an outside leader, who at that time was fighting with another group, he was a relative of several group members, so they all knew him well.

Second, the potential candidates were weak, at least for the majority of groups. When the Syrian conflict started, there were not many local people with prior civil war experience to choose from. At that stage of the conflict, it was very hard to choose the right leader. Fighters did not know which leadership qualities were the most important and did not have enough information about the candidate to evaluate him. But even when fighters understood they needed a qualified person as a leader, it was simply not always possible to find one in the overall weak pool of local candidates.

Most fighters had little time to learn about a candidate’s managerial and fighting skills, so they had to rely on very “noisy” signals, such as his general

intelligence. Since almost none of the candidates had previous war experience, their potential had to be predicted. In those circumstances, the selection process in the majority of groups was often less than optimal. One fighter recalled, “We chose a person who was respectful and trustworthy, had good relations with other members, had a wisdom and knowledge, and who had proved himself during peaceful revolution.” In one known case, a leader was chosen because of his civilian profession: he was a professor at a business school in a local university. The group based its decision on the following logic: he had a Ph.D., so he was educated, and because he was a professor with many outside opportunities yet had still joined the war, it meant he was dedicated to its goals. Is having a graduate degree a sufficient qualification for leading an armed group? Probably not. But at least it sent some, although noisy, signals about a person’s overall qualities.

Because some fighters did not even know what qualified someone as a leader, they had no way to evaluate the candidates. For example, Ahmad Suod, a leader of one of FSA groups, spent most of his time in Turkey trying to get funding for the group and was relatively successful at it. But some members of the group were not happy that their leader was away from the battlefield. Ahmad had a hard time choosing between two options—going back to Syria to personally lead battles and sending someone else (probably less qualified and less well spoken) to conduct fundraising, or staying in Turkey to keep funding going. He chose to stay, but as a result, he lost the respect of his ground troops because he was not there fighting alongside them.

An experienced foreign fighter on the battlefield in the early days of the war observed this about the local forces: “They have no leadership and no experience. . . . It is chaos.”² This general lack of leadership experience in the majority of groups led to strategic mistakes on multiple levels. In addition to simply not knowing how to run an armed group, there was also a psychological component. Too often, group leaders were driven by emotions and economic myopia instead of rational thinking, and they underestimated the war’s duration. As a result, mistakes ranged from temporary battlefield losses to a lack of financial planning, which in turn led to the bankruptcy of

² Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, “Syria: The Foreign Fighters Joining the War Against Bashar al-Assad,” *The Guardian*, September 23, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/23/syria-foreign-fighters-joining-war>.

many groups, even some that were in a good position to secure long-term financial resources.

Later in the war, as Syrian fighters become more experienced, the quality of the potential candidate pool increased, but the selection of the best candidate was still an issue.

With time, groups and fighters learned from their mistakes and got better at recognizing the characteristics and qualities of a potential leader. A member of a relatively large group in the Deir Ezzor countryside said, “In the beginning of the war, we chose a person who knew about fighting and is known to leaders of other groups. But when one of the leaders gets killed, the next leader is chosen based on experience and his relations with group fighters.” When asked, “What do you think your group should have done but did not do?” members of the Abbas groups agreed that they should have changed their commanders on time. Some groups even institutionalized probation periods and tried out a new leader for several weeks and battles before officially confirming him.

Corruption

At the same time, corruption in the leader-selection process became an increasing problem. As resources and accumulated power increased, so did the number of candidates motivated by greed, and it became more crucial for groups to screen for the best possible candidates. However, the best possible candidates were often still not chosen. In many groups, the process had become increasingly corrupt and inefficient. There are several types of leadership selection corruption.

One of the most prominent issues in poor leadership selection was nepotism, or family ties. This was mostly the case in small groups, which usually consisted of a leader, a deputy leader, and fifty to seventy regular fighters. According to local activists, in roughly four of every six groups in the urban areas, the leader and his deputy were related; in rural areas, this ratio was even higher. For example, the deputy leader was often the leader’s son-in-law. In some cases, groups were even called by the family’s last name.

It was apparent that leaders of these groups were not elected based on their qualifications. Most did not have any previous fighting or managerial experience. In many cases, they were illiterate. When asked what

made his leader qualified to run an armed group, one fighter mentioned that the leader had money, “and before the war, he was a member of the hunting club.” As minor as that qualification may seem, in most cases, interviewed fighters were not able to identify *any* specific characteristic of their leader that qualified him for the position—other than being a family member.

It would be understandable to rely on the family structure in the very beginning of the war when there were few signals of qualification available to evaluate a non-family candidate. But as the war progressed, it became a less-than-optimal strategy. When a fighter with Jafar Al-Tayyar, a six-hundred-person group in Deir Ezzor city, was asked what his brigade should not have done, he answered, “The brigade shouldn’t have taken fighters based on their tribal affiliation.”

Despite that, some groups even turned to this strategy later in war. Even those that initially had an uncorrupted selection process were not immune from later promoting people who turned the group into the family-based structure. In Aleppo, one group of friends from the same neighborhood started a group that became five hundred people strong; it was relatively successful in combat and was soon controlling a large territory inside the city. But after one friend was promoted to a leadership position, he replaced all of the founders of the group with his family members and even put his sister in charge of a checkpoint, a move considered highly unacceptable in Syrian culture. As a result, the group quickly lost all of its fighters to competing groups.

Some fighters mentioned that even when a group was not family-based, its leaders were most often chosen by seniority, or who joined first. As a result, it was very hard for people who joined later in the conflict to rise in the ranks. People at the largest disadvantage in this situation were regime army defectors. Despite their superior military knowledge and experience, they ended up at the very bottom or outside of the chain of command because they had joined at a later time (it took time for them to find the best time to defect). This meant most were underutilized, which obviously hurt the quality of the group’s military strategy.

Another example of a poor selection mechanism was access to money. According to a fighter from the Al Muhajireen Ila Allah group, “Our leader was chosen because he had good connections with his relatives in the Gulf. He was the oldest and most connected group member.” Four years into the conflict, this group of forty fighters had three leaders, all of them appointed

because of their connections to outside investors or donors. This strategy not only led to incompetent leadership, but having too many incompetent leaders slowed the decision-making process to a crawl.

In many armed groups, wounded fighters who could not continue fighting were given administrative positions at the group's headquarters. That led to managerial positions filled with individuals who did not want to be there and were envious of other group members who could continue participating in the battles. One interviewed Uzbek foreign fighter explained how he became a leader of a twenty-member Uzbek subgroup (in a bigger Tajik group):

Because of my stupidity and recklessness on the *ribat* [observation point], I was shot in the leg. As a result I was not able to walk and had to sit back on the base. Also it gave me high respect from my group mates because I was the first wounded in our group and was seen as a real *mujahid*. Although I had no idea how to run an armed group and it was very hard, I enjoyed the importance of my new leadership position and, although it will sound funny, particularly the fact that my fighters were carrying me to meetings because I was not able to walk.

In many cases, especially in family-run groups, there was little division of power or consultation with experts outside of the family; the leader was in charge of everything from public relations to military strategy. And even if this situation was tolerable when groups were small, it was not a sustainable system for groups that aspired to grow.

In addition, the decision making in such groups was very authoritarian. Information was not shared with the fighters or anyone else, and some information (especially financial) was hidden. According to fighters, leaders were afraid that if low-level fighters learned about their source of funding, they would try to take it and start their own group. In some authoritarian groups, this fear led leaders to take extreme actions. There were rumors that some leaders were so afraid of competition from fighters who could have challenged them (because of experience and respect from other group members) that they intentionally sent those fighters on the most dangerous missions, where they had the highest probability of being killed. Although it is impossible to check if those rumors were true, the fact that fighters were even talking about it signals its possibility.

In general, such selection processes endangered the groups that practiced them. First, such promotion corruption could be exploited by the enemy. A defector from Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) explained:

I was sitting with the chief of Amn al-Kharji, Abu Abd Rahman al-Tunisi. He knew the weak point of the FSA [Free Syrian Army]. Al-Tunisi told me, “We are going to train guys we know—recruiters, Syrians—train them, and send them back to where they came from. Then we’ll give them \$200,000 to \$300,000, and because they have money, the FSA will put them in top positions.” This is how ISIS took over Syria.³

Second, such less-than-optimal strategies not only made groups less effective, but also made their growth and development almost impossible. Such structure and leadership attitudes did not allow much flexibility and adaptation in the constantly changing environment of a civil war. For example, in 2012, a group’s social media presence became increasingly important. Some groups immediately hired a qualified public relations specialist—such as a media activist with experience covering peaceful demonstrations—and started internet campaigns to advance the group’s goals. Other groups were initially reluctant to hire anyone from outside the family or close circle of friends. Eventually, they realized their family members simply did not have the required technical knowledge, and so promoted an educated (and often wounded) non-family fighter to handle media marketing. Although this was a step in the right direction, those promoted fighters were still not qualified to compete with professional communication specialists, and because they were late to the game, groups that had adapted earlier were already dominating social media.

When ground-level troops knew there were problems with their leaders and were not satisfied with them, there was little they could do. At the beginning of the war little information was available about other groups, so their options were limited. The soldiers complied with the rules and norms inside the group they had originally joined as long as the leader was able to get money to support the group’s fighting capabilities and until the differences between groups were apparent. At that point, most fighters immediately switched to better-organized groups.

³ Michael Weiss, “How ISIS Picks Its Suicide Bombers,” *Daily Beast*, November 16, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/11/16/how-isis-picks-its-suicide-bombers>.

Did all the groups face those problems? Although most likely all armed groups (like all civilian organizations) experienced such problems to some degree, some definitely had it easier than others. Despite the lack of experience with civil war among the general population in Syria, several (and mainly) Islamist groups had more qualified leadership from the beginning and, as a result, had an additional competitive advantage.

Qualifications

One solution to a weak leadership pool and the challenges associated with leadership assessment is to rely on people with a proven record in the same industry. Faced with a similar problem, civilian organizations routinely bring expatriates to help develop a company's operations in a new region. In Syria, while the majority of groups refused to appoint a foreign fighter to a leadership position,⁴ some armed groups did—veterans of civil wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Libya, Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, and Iraq. These expatriates, especially those from Iraq, were valuable for several reasons.

Experience fighting a strong enemy, like the United States, was considered a particularly valuable leadership characteristic. As members of an effective organization like al-Qaeda, they also knew organizational blueprints that could help them build a successful organization and to build it quickly.

Fighters who spoke the same language and came from a similar culture were more likely to be compatible with local fighters, while those accustomed to fighting in similar combat terrain were better strategists. Planning of towns and villages was similar, structures of buildings were comparable, and nature and climate were often indistinguishable. Even the tribal structure was similar on both sides of the Iraq–Syria border.

Conflicts like the war in Iraq were relatively recent, so potential leaders who had fought in that war were still of fighting age. In contrast, others soldiers, like those who had fought in Bosnia, had already retired.

Because of the secrecy of some of the armed groups, in many cases it is hard to check what a person is saying about his previous experience. For example, although Seifullah al-Shishani was always proudly mentioning

⁴ Abdul-Ahad, "Syria: The Foreign Fighters."

his experience in Waziristan (the most prestigious battlefield affiliation for Russian-speaking foreign fighters), soon members of his group found out that in fact he had not fought there; he had only visited for two weeks and met with emirs. Individual experience was easier to verify for Iraqi veterans.

Although such foreign experience was a good start, the particular battles a fighter had participated in also mattered. The more heavy battle experience a potential leader had, the better. When looking at someone from Iraq, desirable fighting experience would have been fighting in Fallujah in 2004 or in the battle for Baghdad airport in 2003. The importance of such experience was so relevant to Islamist groups that it was mirrored in the language. A fighter was said to be literally an “alumnus” of a particular armed conflict or a battle. Military experience was considered the most important education.

After fighting experience, the next most desirable characteristic in a candidate was his incarceration history. Because many of the former groups a candidate had fought with were on the terrorist list, very often fighting experience and jail time went hand in hand. “Graduated from” was the phrase often used in reference to any military prison experience.

This educational analogy extended to the level of prison. Simply having been in prison was not enough; some prisons, like some colleges, were more prestigious than others. For example, after the main U.S.-run prisons in Iraq, two Syrian prisons—military intelligence’s notorious Branch 235 (also known as the Palestinian Branch) and Sednaya—were considered the most prestigious, so time served in those places was considered more valuable.⁵ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a leader of ISIS, and other top ISIS leaders were all “graduates” of the U.S.-run Bucca prison on Iraq’s southern border with Kuwait. Sednaya, some twenty miles north of Damascus, was used to hold Muslim Brotherhood members and fighters returning from the Iraq battlefield. It had housed leaders who had less international fame but still headed crucially important groups in the Syrian civil war. Among them were Zahran Alloush (leader of Jaysh al-Islam), Hassan Aboud (leader of Ahrar al-Sham), and Ahmed Abu Issa (leader of Suqour al-Sham).

Why was serving a prison sentence considered important? First of all, it was a signal of quality. A degree from a top business school alerts a future employer that a candidate was good enough to be admitted to a top

⁵ Although Guantanamo would be considered the most prestigious, relatively few people held there went on to fight in Syria.

school in the first place. Similarly, being imprisoned in the U.S.-run prison (famous for the imprisonment of main jihad leaders) sent a strong signal that someone is important in the civil war world.

Prison experience also increased the inmate's grievance. Due to the harsh treatment, incarceration increased an individual's grievance and desire for revenge. This fact was actually exploited by al-Qaeda. When they wanted to target someone for recruitment, they would report him to the security apparatus as already being a member. He would then be arrested, most likely beaten and tortured, and money would be extorted from his family for his release. Such experiences filled most people with grievance, making them even more strongly dedicated to the goals of an armed group.

Where a candidate served his sentence also determined who his grievance was against, which was another aspect for selecting bodies to consider. While being incarcerated in local, state-run prisons increased grievances toward the state and its institutions, imprisonment in U.S. or foreign coalition prisons would increase grievances against the United States and the West in general. When a candidate who "graduated" from either system was chosen, his grievances would affect the group's military strategy and choice of targets. Thus, the leaders chosen for Syrian groups fighting against Assad had mostly been imprisoned by the Syrian regime and did not have grievances against the West, while many top leaders of ISIS had spent their time in U.S.-run prisons and were interested in outside operations.

Third, as in any university, the connections a person acquires while getting an education play an important role. One of the most important reasons students strive for acceptance into U.S. Ivy League schools is the chance to socialize and network through various clubs, teams, and study groups. It is the same in the insurgency industry. Socializing 24/7 with important people allows one to build connections that could be used later. As a former inmate in the Bucca prison mentioned, "There, we were not only safe, but we were only a few hundred meters away from the entire al-Qaeda leadership."⁶

According to an interviewed member of the U.S. military who worked in Bucca, "Inmates were segregated by armed groups they were fighting with

⁶ Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, "ISIS Used a U.S. Prison as Boot Camp," *Daily Beast*, February 23, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/02/23/isis-used-a-u-s-prison-as-boot-camp>.

because, if there was a mistake, a person was severely beaten. Also older and more radical people, who were more likely to be leaders, were housed separately. Some people on arrival would ask to be housed in the al-Qaeda block, and this demand would often be satisfied.” In addition, “Sometimes guys would allow themselves to be caught. Then, in the intake process, they’d ask to be put in a specific compound which housed a lot of the al-Qaeda guys.”⁷

Just like university classmates in the United States are responsible for many successful startups, particular groups were formed in particular prisons. Mark Zuckerberg founded Facebook with Harvard classmates; Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi organized ISIS with his campmates in Bucca prison.⁸ Many other groups were formed in other prisons, with the major groups being organized in more elite prisons.

The fourth reason why serving a prison term was important was facilitation. Prisons, like universities, bring together people with the same interests and give them a space to develop those interests further. One former Bucca prisoner and member of ISIS explained the process in an interview with the *Guardian*:

We could never have all gotten together like this in Baghdad, or anywhere else. It would have been impossibly dangerous. . . . We had so much time to sit and plan . . . It was the perfect environment. We all agreed to get together when we got out. The way to reconnect was easy. We wrote each other’s details on the elastic of our boxer shorts. When we got out, we called. Everyone who was important to me was written on white elastic. I had their phone numbers, their villages. The first thing I did when I was safe in west Baghdad was to undress, then carefully take a pair of scissors to the underwear . . . I cut the fabric from my boxers and all the numbers were there. We reconnected. And we got to work.⁹

Prisons served exactly the same role for a lot of startup armed groups that universities had for new companies—and then some. They provided

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ In all, nine members of the Islamic State’s top command did time in Bucca. Apart from Baghdadi himself, his deputy (Abu Muslim al-Turkmani), senior military leader Haji Bakr, and the leader of foreign fighters (Abu Qasim) had been incarcerated there.

⁹ Chulov Martin, “ISIS: The Inside Story,” *The Guardian*, December 11 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story?CMP=share_btn_tw.

management training, office space, a safe space away from the battlefield, healthcare, dental care, food, and minimal outside distractions.¹⁰ According to one prison guard, a large cell area in Bucca prison was even nicknamed “Camp Caliphate” and its inmates were called *takfiris*.¹¹

In Syria, Sednaya prison inmates were segregated from the rest of the population, which allowed them to socialize better. Men in the Islamic Brotherhood who had been detained in the 1970s and 1980s, were on the second floor of the prison. The four hundred or so more recent jihadists lived in isolation on the third floor, in an area the inmates termed “the black door” and guards called “the al-Qaeda wing.”¹²

In prisons where jihadi inmates were not segregated, they were able to socialize and make connections with other people from the underground world like drug dealers, weapon traders, and smugglers. These contacts also proved useful later when armed groups needed weapons or smuggling services.

Finally, not only did inmates socialize with each other, they also transferred knowledge and taught each other. The tactics and strategies a candidate had learned from others were so important that he listed them on his résumé. If a candidate had shared a housing area with a big name in the jihadi world, and he could call him his “mentor,” that was like doing an internship with a major industry leader. And the most important people from Bucca prison were those who had been close to Zarqawi. Adel Jasim Mohammed, a former detainee, once described this education process to *Al Jazeera*: “Extremists had freedom to educate the young detainees. I saw them giving courses using classroom boards on how to use explosives, weapons, and how to become suicide bombers.”¹³ One interviewed prison guard remembered seeing pictures drawn by inmates of weaponized drones prototypes (kites dropping hand grenades).

And while theoretical knowledge was important, inmates also did not forget about physical readiness. According to an interviewed member of

¹⁰ According to an interviewed member of the Bucca camp leadership, unlike other prisons in other conflicts in Iraq, they were not able to have cameras inside housing units to monitor inmates’ activities. Whenever cameras were installed, they were destroyed almost immediately.

¹¹ They did not know the meaning of the word *takfiri* but called those inmates that because they often heard that word from them.

¹² Rania Abouzeid, “The Jihad Next Door,” *Politico*, June 23, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/al-qaeda-iraq-syria-108214>.

¹³ “US Iraq Jail an al-Qaeda School,” *Al Jazeera*, December 12 2009, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2009/12/2009121274712823455.html>

the U.S. military who worked in Bucca, inmates had regular physical exercise routines: “They were running in formation with someone like a staff sergeant telling them what to do and then lined up to do pushups. They probably learned it from our military while in the camp because physical exercises are not a norm in the Middle East.”

One former Bucca detainee who went on to join ISIS summarized his prison experience this way: “For us it was an academy . . . but for them [the senior leaders], it was management school. There wasn’t a void at all because so many people had been mentored in prison.”¹⁴

As in the civilian world, although those qualifications are important, they do not weigh as heavily as truly remarkable work achievements do. A person who had fighting experience from other conflicts, had professional military training, and showed significant results in battles could have obtained a leadership position without having a prison term on his résumé. For example, according to a former ISIS foreign fighter, “Although I do not like a lot of what Umar Shishani did, he really had results. His operations were successful and his strategy, effective.” Lieut. Col. Gulmurod Khalimov of the Tajiki army was appointed ISIS minister of war to replace killed Umar Shishani almost right after joining ISIS because of his professional training and extensive experience back home.

Religiosity was not considered a crucial leadership quality. For example, many foreign fighters complained that the leaders of ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Jaish Muhajareen wa Ansar not only did not know much about religion but were not even interested in learning. One former foreign fighter commented, “Of course Umar Shishani or Saifullah Sishani prayed five times a day, but that was basically as far as it got.” According to an interviewed friend of Gulmurod Khalimov in Tajikistan, he was not religious at all, at least before he left for ISIS.

Three groups that had, from the very beginning, enjoyed the luxury of having experienced leaders were ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Ahrar al-Sham. For those groups, a good “civil war résumé” was a prerequisite for any top leadership position, and this requirement served them well. Because of their own previous fighting experience, they knew the exact qualities a fighter and leader needed. In other words, they knew what to look for when making a promotion or recruitment decision.

¹⁴ Ibid.

In an interview, members from two of those three groups described an ideal (and hypothetical) leader for their groups. According to an Ahrar al-Sham fighter,

A leader should be Syrian and a Syrian nationalist (believe in unity of the country); a member of the Muslim Brotherhood (preferably participant in the 1980 demonstrations organized by the party); an ex-inmate of Sednaya prison, where he was preferably taught by Syrian sheikhs of al-Qaeda or Salafi jihadists; had experience fighting in Iraq; and had an undergraduate diploma (preferably in engineering).

Requirements for the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra were as follows: “He should not be Syrian, but an Arab (believe in Muslim identity); have experience fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan (preferably as a fighter with al-Qaeda); and have a degree in sharia law.”

ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Ahrar al-Sham had professional leaders with significant fighting experience as well as access to consultation with the main leaders of already organized groups. For example, Jabhat al-Nusra leader Abu Mohammad al-Golani was a graduate of Bucca prison and an alumnus of the Iraq war. Other members included Abu Humam al-Shami, with experience in Afghanistan, and Abu Firas al-Suri, with experience in Afghanistan and Yemen.

Under such experienced leadership, Jabhat al-Nusra started with a stable plan, including financial planning, and was able to grow and increase its resources while other groups were still learning how the industry worked. Describing relations with al-Nusra in 2012, ISIS emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi claimed, “We laid plans for them, and drew up the work policy for them, and gave them what financial support we could every month, and supplied them with men who had known the battlefields of jihad.”¹⁵

At the same time, these leaders were not simply relying on advice from al-Baghdadi and his team but were building their own qualified midlevel officer corps from other experienced people in their ranks. Moving from Iraq to Syria, al-Golani specifically targeted former Saydnaya inmates to recruit for al-Nusra. As soon as Golani made his secret trip across the border, he reached out to cells of Saydnaya men already active as well as others who

¹⁵ Audio statement by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, April 2013, cited in Seth G. Jones, “Syria’s Growing Jihad,” *Survival* 55, no. 4 (2013): 53–72, 55.

were waiting for an al-Qaeda-linked organization to emerge through word of mouth or handwritten letters delivered by couriers.¹⁶

Midlevel Leadership

The most important skill of the art of administration that we must use is learning how to establish committees and specializations and dividing labor so that all the activities do not fall on the shoulders of a single person or small group of people, in addition to training all of the individuals and passing on practical knowledge until (the point is reached) that if one manager disappears another will arise (to take his place).

Abu Bakr Naji, *Management of Savagery*

The main role of leaders was not just organizing day-to-day activities but building a sustainable institution and internal bureaucracy that would function even after the founding leaders were gone. For this to happen, midlevel leadership positions needed to be established for several reasons.

First, without a qualified midlevel officer corps, even the best ideas from top leadership would not be executed properly and, as a result, would be wasted. Also, some problems are simply too minor to preoccupy top leadership and should be solved on lower levels. Emirs, for example, could not be planning military operations and doing payroll and be good at both tasks at the same time. For the organization to work, the leader should be able to delegate those tasks to a military emir and an emir for the budget.

Second, as a group increases in size and territory, additional midlevel (and low-level) leaders should be installed to allow for power decentralization. Lecture notes from someone who appears to be an officer in the Russian-speaking foreign fighters' base in Mosul showed that even the smallest fighting unit was decentralized, with a separate planning office and multiple subgroups, each with its own leadership.

Third, although in a civilian organization it is usually possible to estimate a CEO's tenure and choose and train a successor, that is not the case in a civil war environment, where a leader could be killed in a matter of

¹⁶ Abouzeid, "Jihad Next Door."

seconds. Even worse, several top leaders could be killed at the same time. In such cases, a well-thought-out institutional mechanism would ensure that the group could function even after its leaders were killed or captured. Leaders should be immediately replaced by the promotion of people from lower ranks, who should be trained accordingly.

Surprisingly, the majority of FSA groups were not prepared for that scenario. None of the interviewed fighters or civilian activists remembered any group that had a leadership succession plan. According to one fighter, leaders thought that “they would never change and would outlive Assad.” For most, that was not the case, and their groups did not survive the decapitation. One instance involved one of the strongest groups in Aleppo, Liwa Al Tawheed. The group had approximately nine thousand fighters, but when its leader, Abdul Qader Saleh (Haji Mare’), was killed in an airstrike in 2013, the group dissolved into many small groups, and some fighters joined other major groups.

But on September 9, 2014, when most of the leaders of Ahrar al-Sham (forty-six people in total) were killed in an explosion during a top-level meeting in an underground site, the surviving members were able to gather and quickly elect a new team of leaders from among a number of formerly second-tier commanders and recent affiliates. Those deaths could easily have marked the end of the group, but the ability to promote midlevel leaders allowed the group to continue its operations without any delay.

While short-sighted groups soon disappeared, well-functioning groups with an eye on long-term planning ensured that leaders on all levels were qualified. Until ISIS took the town, one group from Deir Ezzor had been successfully functioning and growing since 2011. The group had taken a professional, long-term planning approach to running the military organization, and the most important people in the group were the leader and the military leader, two separate positions with clearly demarcated responsibilities. The military leader was appointed to his position due to his experience fighting in Fallujah for approximately a year, which made him a qualified candidate.

In 2011 and 2012, although the group was still relatively small, it already had a well-established internal structure. It had a military wing and a civilian wing. The military wing consisted of forty fighters. The civilian wing included people in charge of media relations, aid (including a kitchen), and a medic (the first-aid station). Those people were also chosen based on their

qualifications, which were confirmed by references. For example, usually a group medic was a medical student or, as in this case, someone who used to work in the gym with sport injuries. Because of the importance of his position, references alone were not enough, and he was also checked on the field.

Since the group was successful—was able to increase funding, win battles, and promote itself through social media—it started controlling more territory and attracting more fighters. At that point, the group also adopted more Islamist ideology, which helped recruiters to select more dedicated fighters.

Since the group's leaders were experienced, they were also able to quickly adapt to the constantly changing environment. In 2014, the group was rapidly expanding and, as a result, required internal restructuring. First they added another office, a semi-independent court in charge of ensuring discipline for infractions like spying for the regime, not reporting for duty, or disobeying orders. Second, because the previous group structure was no longer sufficiently effective in the new environment, decentralization was needed. By then, the group was fighting on three frontlines, and so it was divided into three subgroups. This made for faster decision making, which made the group more effective in combat. Each subgroup got its own leader, a deputy, and an administration office, which consisted of a store emir, warehouse emir, finance emir, and mechanic emir (in charge of cars and gas).

With the increase in the number of available midlevel leadership positions, more low-level fighters were promoted to midlevel leadership. What was the procedure, and what were the promotion criteria?

First of all, a person needed to be qualified for the position, but he also had to be respected by the group and proven in combat. This requirement could not be waived.

Second, he had to be dedicated to the goal of the war. An undedicated person would not work to the best of his abilities or take necessary risks and might defect to the enemy (or spy for the group from inside). To reduce the chances of this happening, priority for promotion was given to people who had been beaten and tortured in prison and had lost friends and family members in combat. It was assumed that the more grievances a fighter had, the more motivated by revenge he was. This meant he would fight wholeheartedly, would be more likely to take necessary risks, and would be less likely to commit treason.

While in the previous generation of civil wars the number of promotion-related requirements ended there, new multifaction rebellions added one more: loyalty to the group. Groups did not want fighters who would defect to the regime or switch to another group. In the best-case scenario, a leader who switched would represent only a loss of investment (training and mentorship). But in the worst-case scenario (because groups were competing for power), such a move might cost the group its competitive advantage. When one of the founding leaders of Ahrar al-Sham (and dozens of other commanders) declared their resignation and merged with Jabhat al-Nusra, it significantly discredited Ahrar al-Sham, according to activists on the ground.

In some groups, the loyalty of a candidate was measured much like the loyalty of a fighter, by how much he embraced the group's code of conduct. But in an Islamist group like Jabhat al-Nusra, which already imposed strict restrictions on everyone, a leadership candidate had to be willing to go above and beyond to prove his worth. Even when Jabhat al-Nusra was short on funding and relaxed its rules for new members (when "you see those who smoke, who drink and are criminals" showing the lower standards of dedication of fighters), the group continued to be strict about promotions.¹⁷ Thus, a fighter interested in moving up would display behavior that was highly visible to those inside and outside of the group and that indicated his superior dedication to (most often) a group's version of Islamist conduct. Basically, he was showing off. Here are some examples:

Being pictured with cats: Although its strategic use seems comical and childish, it has significant roots. The Prophet Muhammad's love for cats is very well known,¹⁸ so replicating it signifies a fighter's desire to be similar to the most important religious figure. So in the very first days of the conflict, some members of Jabhat al-Nusra and other Islamist groups took pictures with cats and posted them on social media for everyone to see.

¹⁷ Phil Sands and Maayeh Suha, "Al-Qaeda Group Losing Influence in Southern Syria," *The National*, November 13, 2014, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/al-qaeda-group-losing-influence-in-southern-syria>.

¹⁸ For example, when the call to prayers was heard, a cat was asleep on one of the sleeves of the Prophet's robes. The Prophet wanted to wear the robe to go to prayer. Rather than disturb the cat, Muhammad cut off his sleeve to leave it in peace. The Prophet then stroked the cat three times, which, it is said, granted it seven lives and the ability to land on his feet at all times.

Using Islamic words: Some Islamist fighters overused words—both positive and negative—with a religious connotation. Very frequent use of phrases such as “If God wants,” “Upon God’s permission,” and “*Sobhan allah*” to refer to something beautiful are examples. Before the war, such overuse would have been considered in bad taste or as showing poor language skills, and the person using them would have been considered poorly educated. Examples of negative words were *kafir* (unbeliever), *murtad* (apostate), *murjeet*,¹⁹ *takfiris*, and *munafiq*.²⁰ In addition, new expressions were coined and widely used. For example, one such phrase could be heard in the streets in Syria: “Thank you for helping me; may God make you a martyr,” or “May God accept your *shahada*.”

Listening to jihadi nasheeds: These were special songs produced by Jabhat al-Nusra and other Islamist groups calling for jihad and promoting the group.²¹ Fighters who wanted to seem especially committed would listen to these *nasheeds* at high volumes while driving their vehicles. Before the war, people were not exposed to such songs, if they existed at all; in fact, listening to them would have been considered crazy behavior.

Using a teeth-cleaning twig (a swaak): This is a chewing stick with one frayed end used to brush the teeth. In Islam, it is frequently advocated for in the Hadith²² so fighters adopted it as another way to associate themselves with him. Before the war, using a *swaak* was considered rude and disgusting, a village-type behavior not acceptable for educated townspeople. In general, people had not even seen *swaaks* in Syria before the war and were only introduced to this word in religion class during discussions of hygiene. Even the most religious teachers only referred to a *swaak* to show how, before the toothbrush was invented, people had to rely on primitive tools.

¹⁹ A sect in Islam whose doctrine states that only God has the authority to judge who is a true Muslim and who is not. Members believed Muslims committing grave sins would remain Muslim and be eligible for paradise if they remained faithful.

²⁰ A group decried in the Quran as outward Muslims who were secretly unsympathetic to the cause of Muslims and actively sought to undermine the Muslim community.

²¹ Jabhat al-Nusra songs include such titles as “Peace on Al-Nusra” and “Defeating Blasphemy.”

²² “My father said, ‘I came to the Prophet (be peace upon him) and saw him carrying a *Siwak* in his hand and cleansing his teeth, saying, ‘U’ U’” as if he was retching while the *Siwak* was in his mouth” *Sahih al-Bukhari* 244, Book 4, Hadith 111 Vol. 1, Book 4, Hadith 245.

Choosing a jihadi name: Some fighters chose to signal their loyalty by choosing nicknames based on the strong Islamic war words, thus becoming *Abu Jihad* (the father of jihad), *Abu Shaheed* (the father of a Muslim martyr), or *Abu Mujahid* (father of one who struggles for the sake of Allah and Islam). According to one former Jabhat al-Nusra fighter, such names usually belonged to midlevel group leaders.

Enforcing rules on others: For a fighter, this meant not only not smoking himself but also not allowing others to smoke by confiscating other people's cigarettes and burning them. Fighters looking for promotion desired to be seen as enforcing group policies, so they would record violations of group-imposed rules on their cell phones, as proof of their zealotry, and show them to important people or post them on social media.

Conclusion

The main reason for suboptimal and myopic decisions in the majority of FSA groups was the overall lack of civil war experience in their top leadership. That in turn was a result of either not having any experienced leaders available or the lack of desire (or ability) to promote qualified people.

While in the beginning of the war there were not many qualified people to choose from, later on, too many people wanted to become leaders for personal benefit, and it became harder to choose those who were qualified and dedicated. That was either done intentionally, because of a corrupt system, or unintentionally, because members simply did not know what made a good candidate.

While some groups used family connections and other less-than-optimal promotion methods, other groups approached selection much more carefully. They not only promoted the most qualified people from inside the group but actively sought people from outside. Such external moves ensured that some groups would have the best possible leaders in the industry and that other groups would *not* have them. Once, a military emir of a Deir Ezzor group left and joined Jabhat al-Nusra, and he was immediately promoted to the emir of the whole town. Another example was a member of the aid office who switched to another group in Deir Ezzor, where he was promoted to the emir of aid for the whole city after taking an additional

sharia course. Abu Umar Shishani, an ISIS military emir, obtained his position because of successful military operations as the leader of Jaish Mahajreen wa Ansar.

Some groups went even further in adapting civilian best practices in human resource management and insisted on fresh blood in the leadership. When Abu Jaber's year appointment as the Ahrar al-Sham leader expired, he could have sought reappointment, but he declined. According to an Ahrar al-Sham spokesperson, Ahmed Qara Ali, "Brother Hashem al-Sheikh refused to extend his term since he wanted to allow for new blood to be pumped into the leadership."²³

So while some groups from the very beginning were approaching top-level human resources strategically and looking for the best candidates, others were not. Some leaders got their experience in other conflicts, and by the time the war in Syria started, they clearly knew how to run an armed group. Those groups were able to develop clear policies, economic and otherwise, and take control of long-term revenue sources. This previous experience also taught these leaders the importance of developing a stable institution so that if a group was decapitated, a qualified person would immediately step in. By doing so, they ensured the group's long-term sustainability.

As a result, groups with qualified leadership got off to a quick start and it was almost impossible to catch up with them. The inequality in organizational qualities and funding meant that their share of power only grew with time. Meanwhile, other groups with less experienced leaders were not able to secure long-term funding or establish a group infrastructure with successful policies and, as a result, did not last long.

²³ Aron Lund, "Abu Yahia al-Hamawi, Ahrar al-Sham's New Leader," *Syria Comment*, September 12, 2015, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/abu-yahia-al-hamawi-ahrar-al-shams-new-leader/>.

Policy Implications

When grievance in the local population increases to the level that a government, through negotiations and concessions, cannot prevent a civil war from starting, or, once it has started, cannot physically defeat the rebels, a question arises: *If the opposition wins, who will take power?*

This is not just a domestic question but an international one, one that foreign governments cannot afford to ignore. On one side, a civil war could represent a window of opportunity, opening up the possibility of new allies in a postwar government. On the other side, the new government could be unpredictable and even more antagonistic than the previous one.

In the previous chapters, I have outlined how the internal competition between different rebel factions operates and have explored what makes some groups more powerful than others through the prism of a labor market theory. In particular, I have proven how, when a group attracts and retains the best possible members, it increases its share of power in the rebel bloc. And although the dynamics among the groups play an important role in which group is most successful overall, it is each group's internal organization—its ability to attract and retain the individuals that constitute the rebel labor market—that truly determines its success.

Once a person decides to take up arms in a civil war, he will look for the armed group that will enable him to be the most effective fighter. Basically, he will look for the group most likely to take care of him and his family, help him realize his goals, and make the best use of his skills. And so for a rebel group to attract fighters, it must be able to provide its members with everything necessary (such as food, weapons, and medical care) and conduct the most important military operations in which a fighter feels his efforts are helping the cause. This requires a great degree of organizational structure on the group's part, and when this structure is apparent, a fighter will decide to join (or switch to) that group.

Yet, just as all groups are not equal in a fighter's eyes, not all fighters are equal from a group's point of view. A successful group requires a core of fighters highly committed to the cause and to the group, and that is not

always the case. Many rebel fighters are interested only in financial remuneration, and they increase their cost-benefit calculations by reducing the danger they expose themselves to while increasing their immediate profit. As a result, these fighters will be more disposed to activities like looting and less likely to engage in actual fighting. Not only do these kinds of fighters drain a group's limited resources and fight poorly, they are also more likely to disobey orders and destroy group cohesion (which reduces the group's combat readiness). These effects on the group also discourage the dedicated prospective fighters it is trying to attract.

So as a group with good funding and a sound organizational structure becomes a popular choice among fighters, it also attracts these less dedicated fighters, which decreases the quality of its manpower and depletes its resources without increasing its power. Of course, it is the wealthiest and best-organized groups that have the most problem with this. So it becomes crucial for a group to ensure that the majority of its members are dedicated to the group's goal, something leadership can do by adopting strict rules grounded in an ideology. Such an ideology needs to correlate only mildly, if at all, with the group's cause to be effective.

This use of ideology requires a strict and sometimes radical code of conduct that allows the group to first screen prospective members and then ensure that only the most dedicated fighters remain. Individuals more interested in monetary gain or other goals will probably not be interested in the level of sacrifice that membership in such a group would entail. But such a code will not deter dedicated fighters; for them, such a tradeoff is worth the reward—fighting in a group that will ultimately help them realize the shared goal of the group.

In looking to recruit dedicated fighters, foreigners are often considered a desirable option for several reasons. Their initial expenditure of time, money, and energy to reach the war zone already signals a level of dedication. They are also likely to improve fundraising; not only do they often possess fundraising knowledge and opportunities not available among locals, but their very presence can be used for external (fundraising) and internal (recruiting) propaganda.

Managing foreign fighters, however, can be a challenge and may lead to serious internal problems. Because their goals are often different from those of local group members, taking them on means risking internal conflicts and power struggles that may weaken or destabilize the group as a whole.

As is the case for success in every area of a group's survival, pertinent human resource policies require qualified leadership. Some groups may have leaders with previous combat experience, but most often, leaders must learn as they go. Many groups do not survive this learning period. And even the groups with qualified top leaders still need midlevel leaders who can help develop and execute effective internal policies. Top-level leaders must be willing and able to select and promote the most competent and dedicated personnel. For prospective midlevel leaders coming up through the ranks, signaling their dedication often means displaying an even stricter-than-required adherence to the group's official ideology. That makes adopting radical ideology (and, most importantly, the restrictions stemming from it) even more likely for successful groups where such signaling is required for promotion.

One potentially negative side effect of using ideology to qualify and promote members is attracting people who are more interested in ideology than in the goal of the group or the war. Not only will such members challenge leaders whose commitment appears to be less than their own, they will become disappointed in the group and will be more likely to become spies or even sabotage the group from inside. So to be the most effective, a group has to find a balance in its ideology: it has to be central enough to screen out undesirables but not so central that it overshadows the group's overall goal for war.

While being effectively organized allows groups to win the competition for human resources, the correct use of ideology ensures the *quality* of personnel. As a result, well-organized groups are more likely to appear to be the most ideological. Such groups usually not only become some of the strongest in the rebel bloc—they can attract the largest number of the most qualified fighters and promote the most dedicated fighters to leadership positions—but they also have a real chance to defeat the enemy because their development phase has forced them to become effectively organized and competent.

But if a well-organized group does not use ideology correctly, the group's leaders will be discredited among new recruits and infighting will increase. Inability to manage the group's ideology will eventually lead to, first, a decrease in the group's military capabilities and, second, its decline and defeat.

Now that I have described how a group is able to dominate a rebel bloc, I will discuss how this knowledge can be used to terminate a conflict faster

by making foreign government intervention more effective. In particular, I will cover how foreign actors could (1) choose a group in the rebel bloc to support; (2) persuade the group to accept its support; and (3) provide the proper help at the right time to empower one group at the expense of others within the rebel camp.

Although today's civil conflicts are very different from those of previous generations, it is not a foregone conclusion that today's Western-affiliated rebel groups will suffer defeat. While with any new conflict the task becomes more and more difficult, it is still possible to outcompete other groups in the rebel bloc, at least right now.

On the other side, it is hard to imagine a victory of a Western-oriented startup armed group without significant outside support because, as shown in previous chapters, they lack experience and resources. At the same time, international actors with a different agenda also do not want to miss a chance to use their money, experience, and knowledge to increase their sphere of influence through proxy groups in war-torn countries. That, in sum, makes this generation's civil wars a highly competitive market for outside supporters.

Taking a Necessary Risk

Selecting one rebel group to support out of many is more risky than choosing one of two sides, as before, and it is much harder for an armed group trying to outcompete other groups and consolidate power in a strongly competitive environment than merely entering a new market with an almost guaranteed monopoly and defeating an enemy by force.

In civil wars, as in any civilian industry, investors are mainly interested in helping an organization grow faster so that they can achieve their goals. Investing means providing money, knowledge, and access to necessary information, infrastructure, and innovations. So while in the civilian industry such investors are individuals or companies, in armed conflicts, such investors are foreign governments.

Although a foreign government could choose to invest at any point in the conflict, getting in the game early will give it and its armed group a chance to move faster, be more effective, and, as result, leave competitors far behind. That not only helps the foreign government earn its dividends and save money but also terminates the conflict faster, with less infighting and

civilian casualties. This is particularly the case for Western governments, for several reasons.

The first reason is that in the beginning of the conflict, dedicated individuals who are most likely to work successfully with Western governments are not experienced (compared to their counterparts, who gained experience fighting with Islamist groups in other conflicts) and are on the frontline (compared to for-profit fighters, who are more interested in controlling checkpoints). Thus, they are more likely to be killed early in the conflict.

Second, with time in conflict, the level of grievance among the population (and fighters in particular) increases. As a result, they turn to radical groups that promise the hardest punishment the quickest. Thus, to be able to compete for fighters, pro-West groups have to increase their promised punishment to the enemy. This reduces the odds of a peaceful settlement.

Third, democratic governments are restricted from taking qualified individuals who already turned to such radical groups and were associated with groups labeled as “terrorist,” making it much harder to recruit people with high dedication and quality later in the conflict, once such groups became popular among fighters. This is not a problem for Islamist groups, which accept fighters switching from non-ideological armed groups.

And finally, with increasing time in conflict, the ethical bar of moderate armed groups for funding sources slips, making it harder for democratic governments to explain supporting those groups. Helping those groups would also harm the investing country’s reputation among civilians in the conflict zone (a problem that does not exist for nondemocratic governments).

Although early investment is the most profitable, it is also the riskiest. In the beginning of the conflict, it is hard to evaluate which groups will be more successful. The risk of failure is so immense and the potential damage so substantial that many investors are reluctant to take the first step at the beginning of the civil war.

Relations between investors and an organization are never simple, but in civil wars, the absence of law makes negotiations particularly complicated. In developed countries, a legal framework exists so that contracts and agreements in civilian industry can be enforced, which protects the interests of both companies and investors. But such security is not available in a war-torn country for either party. Investors cannot be sure a rebel group will honor their funding terms because even monitoring a group’s

behavior, to say nothing of enforcing anything in a war zone, is a herculean task. Similarly, an investor could cut funding at any minute, leaving a group at a grave disadvantage among other groups and against the enemy. In either case, when any terms of the contract/agreement are violated, there is no court an investor or an armed group can turn to. Thus, negotiations are conducted in an environment of deep distrust, and it falls on investors to solve any problems with the organization.

Choosing a Group to Support

The key to success for a foreign government and an armed group working together is the proximity of their goals. Since armed groups look for funding that will help them achieve their goal, they look for foreign investors who appear interested in their goal. However, foreign actors are looking for a group that will advance their goal and pay dividends on their investment. These different goals make it particularly difficult to match investors and armed groups.

But why are their goals different? First, an investor whose goals were identical to those of a group would be a donor, not an investor. But there is little altruism in international relations, particularly during war, so donors are rare and the goals of the investor and group are almost always different.¹

Second, different investors have different goals, even if they differ only slightly. When multiple international actors do have identical goals, they channel support through a mutual outlet, and they become one investor from a group's standpoint. Much like in a high-tech industry where investors with the same goals form an investment group to fund projects of interest, international investors in a civil war form a coalition (like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] or the coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [ISIS]). This allows them to reduce transactional costs, increase available funding, and broaden their expertise.

¹ In a rare case, if an international third party is in fact a donor, it would be better off starting by supporting an armed group immediately after it is established in order to make it the most organized, effective armed group in the rebel bloc. It would thus win the competition for human resources and would eventually dominate the rebellion.

At the same time, the difference between the goals of different foreign governments is relatively small because if it was major, they would have been supporting different sides of the conflict and not different groups on one side. Thus, there are differences both between the objectives of armed groups and their backers, and between one investor and another, which leads to the second level of a proxy war in contemporary armed conflicts. So, for an investor and an armed group to match, either one of those parties has to misrepresent its true goal, or both parties have to agree on middle ground.

Misrepresenting Goals

As with any industry, there are at least two types of markets in a civil war: a seller's market (when there are more investors than there are groups) and a buyer's market (when there are more groups than investors). The state of the market determines who will intentionally hide its true goal, the investor or the group.

Seller's Market

In a seller's market, many investors are interested in the ongoing civil war and they all compete to fund and gain ownership of the most successful armed group. As a result, investors have an incentive to misrepresent their goal to match that of the groups they are most interested in funding. In Syria, this was the case at the beginning of the civil war. Many investors rushed in, but at that point, armed groups themselves still had some savings and other sources of funding, so they were not desperately searching for outside support and were thus able to choose the best terms of agreement. As a result, potential investors had to compete for a group's attention and interest. For example, a November 2012 meeting between the most prominent Syrian rebel commanders from every large independent group was organized in Doha, Qatar. Qatar not only promised funding and weapons but offered to pay significant financial incentives up front for simply attending the meeting. Saudi leaders saw this meeting as competition and offered vast sums to the same leaders to refuse to attend the Qatar meeting and work with them instead. Groups successfully exploited this competition. Some

rebel groups went so far as to nominally split, sending one commander to Doha with the other staying in Syria, thus receiving money and support from both sponsors.

Such a market is very risky to invest in for the obvious reason that, without an outside enforcement mechanism, armed groups could easily fail to comply with the agreement they made with an investor. Moreover, since most armed groups in civil wars have a short time horizon, they care little about their reputation, which gives them little reason to concern themselves with following agreements.

Buyer's Market

In a buyer's market, few investors are interested, and groups must work hard to gain anyone's interest. In this situation, groups have an incentive to hide their true goal and misrepresent themselves to the investor.

This also happened in Syria, but only two to three years after the war had started. With the war progressing, personal savings had dried up. Wealthy donors were also unable to continue providing support; they either lost hope of winning, their money dried up, or new laws adopted in their home countries prevented them from continuing to send money. As a result, armed groups became desperate, looking anywhere for money to continue fighting.

Ahmad Zeidan of the Idlib Military Council, talking about U.S. support for Syrian fighters, said:

I know that they are afraid of something called al-Qaeda. . . . They talk about Ahrar al-Sham and Suqoor al-Sham. [These groups] are conservative Islamists, but they are not extremists. Many of these groups just want support. . . . We are fighting to have a democratic country, not so that we can install people with American or European or Saudi agendas. . . . We want to topple the regime, so whoever offers us help, we will call our units whatever they want as long as they support us. We just want to finish.²

² Rania Abouzeid, "Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels: Who Are the Saudis and the Qataris Arming?" *Time*, September 19, 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/09/18/syrias-secular-and-islamist-rebels-who-are-the-saudis-and-the-qataris-arming/>.

Local activists noted that around the same time, armed groups appealed to Gulf countries, highlighting the religion their countries shared. In particular, they started portraying the conflict as religious, sometimes even ending their group's promotional videos with questions like, "Why are Muslim brothers not helping us?" Groups also started changing their flags from green (the flag of the revolution) to black to highlight religious similarities.

In both markets, because one side is misrepresenting itself, both parties have incorrect expectations of each other. And although there are short-term prospects for cooperation even while groups or investors are misrepresenting their true goals, long-term failure is nearly guaranteed. Groups need to fight for their goals, and investors expect to receive dividends on their investments.

Problems stemming from misrepresentation could range from fighters not wanting to fight for the new goal and switching to another group (if an investor misrepresents) to the investor micromanaging the group's activities after providing support, making cooperation unproductive (if fighters hide their true goals). The United States encountered this problem in Syria. In 2015, the United States started training and arming Syrian fighters to fight against ISIS (a relatively unpopular goal among the Syrian opposition), making them pledge that they would not use their knowledge and weapons to attack Assad's forces. But because fighting against the regime was the main goal of almost all Syrian fighters, this program was not successful, and out of the 1,500 who passed the first stage of selection, only 200 fighters actually started training.³ Later, when those fighters returned to Syria, some retreated instead of fighting Jabhat al-Nusra, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, leaving U.S.-issued weapons behind, while others defected to the group.

Such behavior from fighters dedicated to their goals was understandable. They saw Jabhat al-Nusra not only as a group that shared their own goal (fighting Assad) but also as the most effective group; they could make the best use of weapons and trained fighters. As a result, there was absolutely no reason for them to fight Jabhat al-Nusra; rather, they should provide them with everything they needed. This situation naturally led to an

³ "US-Trained Rebels Reject Pledge Not to Attack Syrian Regime," *The New Arab*, June 24, 2015, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2015/6/24/us-trained-rebels-reject-pledge-not-to-attack-syrian-regime>.

immediate halt in U.S. funding, and a State Department official cited the “poor performance” of rebel groups in Idlib as the primary reason: when they were up against al-Nusra, the official said, “They didn’t fight hard enough.”⁴

Had the Train and Equip program been started earlier in the war, there would likely have been no interested participants. But because it started in 2015, when the majority of groups had run out of money (buyer’s market), a small number of participants were willing to misrepresent their goals long enough to finish training and receive money. Therefore, successful investors should always be sensitive to the slightest changes in their market of interest and able to quickly recalibrate their strategies accordingly.

Foreign Investor Dilemma

The goals of an armed group are at least slightly different from those of its investor, and if the funded group is fighting for its true goal (instead of the investor’s), the foreign government/investor is not advancing its agenda (earning dividends from the investment). Thus, for an investment to work and bear dividends, a funded group must change its goal to match that of its investor, and that is not an easy task. Most armed groups are motivated to reach their nonmaterial goal and may not be interested in fighting for other goals. The al-Qaeda manual, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call* by Abu Mus’ab As-Suri, explicitly warns about these kinds of actions from the investors’ side and forced change in fighters’ behavior in relation to imposing new goals:

- a. Financing without any conditions
- b. Financing with the advice from the financier, but without the jihadi organization being required to follow the advice
- c. Financing with suggestions from the financier and with anger if the jihadi organization did not implement the suggestions
- d. Financing with the condition that the jihadi organization would have to be committed to following the will of the financier. Only after the

⁴ Tim Mak and Jamie Dettmer, “Exclusive: Obama Cuts Off Syrian Rebels’ Cash,” *Daily Beast*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/01/27/exclusive-obama-cuts-funds-for-the-syrian-rebels-he-claims-to-support>.

financier was absolutely sure that the jihadi expenses had reached a stage that was impossible for the *mujahideen* leadership to continue to work without this money did they (the financiers) start to dictate what they wanted done.

For-profit groups (groups that only care about immediate material benefits), on the other hand, do not care what they are fighting for as long as they are paid for their services. They are the least reliable and least effective, are extremely risk-averse, and have the worst reputation among civilians. They also usually have only a small share of the market and do not openly compete with the primary groups interested in the goals of the war (competing does not help them advance their goal of increasing profit while minimizing expenses and risks). And because their main activity is seeking profit by any means (including looting and kidnapping), supporting them could lead to negative domestic publicity. For these reasons, these groups will agree to all kinds of support, but they are not a good investment, and investors should avoid working with them.

So for an investor looking for an armed group to support in a civil war, it is important to understand the goal of a group and its individual fighters. With this information in mind, what are the possible scenarios between an investor and an armed group?

Fighters Disagree with Investor's Goal

Dedicated fighters might be disappointed in a new goal and leave the group as soon as they learn about it. They might switch to another group or leave the fight altogether. With the loss of manpower, the investors lose on their initial investment. This was a widespread problem in Syria: when rebel group leaders pledged support to ISIS and its goal, many fighters showed their disagreement by switching to other groups.

In some cases, an increase in funding from new investors might entice some fighters to stay. But this scenario could be even worse for the investors. In the first case, they will lose only their time and the initial money they invested; in the second, they would continue sponsoring an ineffective group (which, with time, will turn into a for-profit group) and, as a result, would waste even more money and time and potentially tarnish their reputation.

Middle-Ground Agreement

Sometimes, if the investor's goal incorporates the group's goal, fighters might agree to the investor's sponsorship and go on to fight for both goals. For the group, incorporating the investor's goal into its own goal would be the equivalent of an "outside profit-generating activity," something that is not closely related to the main goal but that could be used to increase funding and bolster the group's success.

This arrangement is beneficial for the group because it would provide them with the necessary funding and would allow them control over their main goal. It is, however, less preferable from the investor's standpoint. Soldiers will not be as interested in an investor's goal as they are in their own goal and will thus pursue it only as mercenaries (trying to increase profit while decreasing the risks involved). This group would also probably leave this particular investor as soon as another investor, one with a goal closer to its own, shows interest.

Fighters Agree with Investor's Goal

The most desirable situation for the investor is for fighters to agree that the investor's goal is more preferable than the group's. Depending on how divergent the new goal is, a group's views could be hard to change or the switch could happen easily without losing any fighters to competing groups. Although a change in motivation and grievance is ideal for the investor, it is rare—although in the Syrian war, there were cases where attempts to change fighters' goals were successful and unsuccessful.

Taking advantage of the generally low level of education and cursory understanding of democracy among rebel fighters, some Islamist groups tried to persuade members to give up fighting Assad with the aim of installing a democratic government in favor of building a caliphate. Islamist lecturers condemned the evils of Western-style democracy and preached the benefits of sharia law, but this did not work entirely. The fatal flaw in Western democracy, they would argue, is the separation of state and religion, which they portray as an absolute prohibition on religious practice. And in the absence of the sharia law, corruption, prostitution, drug use, and other vices flourish. Aiming to connect the fighters' original grievance against Assad (the old goal) with the new grievance against secularism (the new goal),

the sheikhs also taught that Western secularism was responsible for Assad's corruption and brutality. As one sheikh explained in an interview, "Assad is committing crimes because he is secular, and he is secular because of Western influence."

Nevertheless, those efforts were not successful. At the time of the interview, 94 percent of Islamist rebel fighters retained their revolutionary goals of defeating the Assad regime (old goal). Only a quarter of the ostensibly "Islamist" rebels claimed that their goal was "to build an Islamic state" in Syria (new goal). Such failure to persuade local fighters of the benefits of an Islamic state, in the long run, led to a major problem inside the group. (For more on *takfir*, see Chapter 7.)

However, for some fighters at the same time, changing their goal was a natural process when the object of their grievance changed as well. For example, Shaitat, a village in an oil-rich region, had sided with the opposition from the very first days of the revolution. In August 2014, ISIS entered the province and tried to reach a disarmament agreement with local villagers. The village was reasonably afraid to do. They did not trust ISIS and, as a result, did not comply with the disarmament agreement. The result was a conflict that left many casualties on both sides. After the massacre, those who survived demanded revenge, and because the only force in the region that was successfully fighting ISIS was Assad, they joined the regime's army. Among the leaders of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) group that defected back to the regime was Abed es-Sattar, who lost his brother in the fight in Shaitat and sought revenge against ISIS. At least fifty more people from his group followed him. Although they were on the wanted list by the government, they took the risk and switched to the government's side to fight ISIS. Some of them joined the official army, while others joined local units, also known as Jaish Watani.⁵

Even after these fighters had received official amnesty, regime fighters did not trust these former enemies. As a result, they were more frequently sent to the frontlines, with the leaders following the logic of "either they are going to die for us or win for us." However, this was exactly what those fighters were looking for. They even volunteered for the most dangerous positions on the frontlines, where they could act on their revenge against ISIS.

⁵ While some locals were extremely unhappy with this decision, saying, "They could have run to Turkey instead. Why join the regime?" others agreed that they would do the same "if their sons or brothers were killed the same way."

Supporting a Group

Because there are many moving parts in this market, investors must solve their first problem—choosing a group—as soon as possible so they can start to work on actually supporting the group. In this way, investors can empower a group and make it the strongest group in the rebel bloc, and thus have some control over the greatest share of power.

This task cannot be taken lightly. While the lack of same-side competition afforded by the monopolistic conditions of yesterday's civil wars allowed rebel groups to be less effective and organized and prevented their mistakes from ending their rebellion, rebel factions today have less room for mistakes, any of which could easily prove fatal. Multiple competitors were waiting for leading groups to make mistakes so that they could immediately take advantage of the situation.

In addition, because with each new conflict, pro-West armed groups are more at a disadvantage, it becomes harder for Western investors to make their group the most competitive in the rebel group and outperform groups supported by other foreign actors.

Leadership

As shown previously, leadership is crucial for the success of any organization, so investors should not only evaluate a potential group's leadership but also be able to manage it. For a Western government investing in the Middle East, this is not an easy task. Finding qualified leadership for a pro-Western, newly established startup armed group is harder than ever. This problem arose for several historical reasons.

In the previous century, the West lost its monopoly on training qualified potential leaders of armed groups, particularly in the Middle East. While previous generations of rebel leaders in Africa and the former Yugoslavia hailed from Western military organizations such as the French Foreign Legion, British and South African special operations units, and so on, the majority of today's qualified Sunni Muslim group leaders gained their fighting experience with Islamist groups in Yemen, Iraq, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Afghanistan.⁶

⁶ For example, a current member of the French Foreign Legion in the interview said that he did not remember encountering anyone from the Middle East (other than from Israel).

Why is that the case? While it is true that organizations add value to their members, the most dedicated fighters tend to self-select into those groups. Very often, Middle Eastern countries have no effective opposition to the government except for clandestine organizations, so potential leaders who disagree with the government do not have many options to join a peaceful opposition front if they want to make a change. Also, some Middle Eastern official armed forces are corrupt, so that if someone is interested in the military and wants to gain the best combat experience, his main option now is to join al-Qaeda or an Islamic State. Or, in other countries, there could be institutionalized discrimination against them (for example, the Sunnis in Iraq after the U.S. invasion). Moreover, while he could have previously joined the Spanish or French Foreign Legion, it is now very unlikely that he would even be able to get a visa to France (or permanent residency in Spain) to try to join those forces, not to mention other, more regular foreign armies where being a citizen of the country is mandatory.

Another reason for the shortage of qualified leaders is the shortage of qualified people from elsewhere. Western countries not only refuse to pay ransoms and use diplomatic pressure to rescue their citizens from war zones if something bad happens but have also adopted new laws explicitly prohibiting citizens from taking part in foreign wars.⁷ At least in the United States, this law was made to prevent people from joining terrorist groups, but moderate groups were also affected by this practice. Even foreigners who joined groups supported by the West were often jailed or placed on the radar of law enforcement. For the moderate rebel groups in the Middle East, such practices severely obstruct the recruitment of qualified leadership.

Because people qualified to take those positions probably have better alternatives, which significantly alters their cost-benefit calculations, such people most likely would have citizenship in a Western country, would be respected as veterans in their adopted land, and thus would be less likely to risk long prison sentences or being under surveillance for their efforts to join such groups. On the other hand, people who want to join radical groups are more likely to take a risk. Usually, they have fewer outside options, do not plan to ever come back, and most likely are already on the radar of law

⁷ Jessica Burniske, Dustin A. Lewis, and Naz K. Modirzadeh, "Suppressing Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Supporting Principled Humanitarian Action: A Provisional Framework for Analyzing State Practice," October 14, 2015. Available at SSRN, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2673502> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2673502>.

enforcement (or at least they are under this impression). For them, trying to join radical groups on a foreign battlefield does not add much to a possible prison sentence.

These events have not gone unnoticed by civil war industry participants across the globe, and it is now more difficult than ever for investors to find qualified and experienced leadership for their armed groups, if not impossible. An investor could appoint a foreign military adviser to the group, but finding a professional leader to coordinate all group operations who (1) knows the details of the country of operation (speaks local languages and has deep local ethnographic and political knowledge); (2) has experience with startup armed groups and operations (understands the best management practices); (3) has enough experience in the country to be able to identify and recruit qualified low-level leadership; (4) knows cultural and social norms in the country of investment; and (5) is willing to take the necessary risks to run such an organization (i.e., he is not a for-profit fighter simply hired to do his job, but instead stakes his reputation on the success of the rebellion) seems almost impossible. This means an ideal candidate should be a member of the diaspora (he knows the country well) with connections to his country of origin (shares grievances of the local population and is interested in the goals of the war), should be experienced in leading special operation units in professional Western armies (that is, combat experience in a semi-independent unit), and should have a desire to participate in the future of his native war-torn country. Even if such a person existed, it would most likely be illegal for him to take this position.

And while radical groups are welcoming qualified individuals who switch from nonradical groups, because of their terrorist organization status, pro-West armed groups would not be able to take a person who was previously affiliated with a radical group, even if he wants to switch. While ISIS, for example, was happy to accept and promote Gulmurod Khalimov—who was once with secular armed forces in Tajikistan fighting against Islamists, and trained in the United States—to a top military position, it is very hard to imagine such a move going in an opposite direction.

So instead, the investor has to settle for the most qualified local individual, who is much less qualified than the investor would prefer. At the very least, such a candidate will probably have no experience with a startup armed group. And any locals with at least some of the required qualifications will have to compete for those people with other armed groups fighting on the

same side. Even then, that leader will most likely still be less experienced than leaders affiliated with groups like al-Qaeda.

This means that some armed groups and their investors are starting with a crucial disadvantage, one that is very hard to overcome later on. In addition, with each passing civil war, the disparity between the capabilities of professional (Islamist) and amateur (moderate) groups will only grow. This means that, in any future fractionalized rebellion, Islamist groups will be able to take the lead even faster, which makes catching up to them even harder.

Monetary Support

After leadership, the next crucial concern is financial support. It is very important for both an investor and the group to agree on the amount and timing of support to reduce unintentional budget uncertainties. An investor needs to agree on a long-term budget to match more long-term goals instead of small, short-term victories. Groups need to find an investor who can fulfill that long-term budget and ensure funding will not be delayed or affected in any way. Such assurance will give both the investor and the group the best long-term results, but it requires more mutual trust.

Attracting Fighters

Once the investor and group have procured qualified leadership and a long-term budget, they have to popularize the group among prospective fighters to increase the quantity and quality of its manpower. If their efforts are successful, other groups (no matter how well funded they are) will eventually have to disband.

However, popularizing a group is not just a matter of propaganda. Propaganda will not only fail in the long term but could even be harmful. If the actual conditions in the group do not meet fighters' expectations, fighters could easily switch to other groups, or worse they could stay and continue consuming the group's resources without taking required combat risks. Depending on their level of disappointment, fighters might also become spies or sabotage the group from within. To prevent this, an investor and/or group leader should actually take care of the group members,

essentially following common textbook guidelines for civilian human resource management.

Knowing that potential fighters are interested in the group that is the most effective in fighting for the same goal they are interested in, a new group should be known for participating in the most important battles and winning them. Here again, in the beginning, any Western-oriented group will lose to a group that, for example, is a representative of al-Qaeda in a particular conflict because of al-Qaeda's reputation of being effective against even the most sophisticated enemy. But despite starting with such a disadvantage, with time in conflict, another group could possibly challenge it if, for example, in addition to having success on the battlefield, the group is publicly associated with U.S. Special Operations Forces, which also still have a reputation in the Middle East of professionalism and effectiveness.

Another guideline is providing direct benefits, like all the basic necessities. In a war zone, fighters should receive not only a monetary salary but also direct aid because sometimes it is hard to get anything imported into the war zone. In Syria, for example, fighters should be getting bread, food, cooking oil, hygiene products, children's necessities, clothes, and, depending on the location of the war, heating oil, mosquito nets, or fans and generators as well. The main goal of these direct benefits is two-fold: (1) it makes the group more appealing to potential recruits and (2) it helps fighters focus on the war instead of the everyday problems that they and their family would otherwise be facing. Such a practice will increase the pool of qualified applicants and improve retention rates because group members' needs are met. It will also make fighters more effective because they will be getting nutritious food and more rest (and consequently will have more energy for combat).

Another direct benefit is medical care and insurance. This includes short-term and long-term care. The first thing is medical care for the wounded. There should be hospitals and medical checkpoints in place with enough medicine and qualified medical personnel to take care of wounded fighters. There are several benefits to investing in medical care. Having immediate access to healthcare sets a group apart from the other groups fighting on the same side; it allows fighters to take more risks on the battlefield; it reduces training costs because qualified fighters will experience fewer casualties; and it bolsters the investor's reputation. Even for the most casualty-averse segment of the domestic population, this is an acceptable sort of intervention because it does not endanger the investor's home country personnel

(hospitals could be located away from the frontline or in the neighboring country) and because medical help is generally perceived as a favorable humanitarian cause.

This is known and widely used in Israel, where local hospitals treat wounded Syrian fighters, including members of groups like al-Nusra, who have been brought there by the Israeli Army from the Syrian border. In doing so, Israel increases its good standing with groups fighting in Syria because they are helping fighters when they need it the most—and it is seen as a purely humanitarian action by the domestic public and international community, so it only promotes a positive image of the country internationally.⁸

The question of long-term help is more complicated. Any protracted conflict will leave many fighters dead or permanently disabled, so fighters want groups that will take care of them if they are wounded and their families if they are killed. This is difficult because not only does it require more money and a longer commitment, but there is no enforcement in lawless, war-torn countries. Any agreement is based solely on the reputation and past behavior of investors and groups. Consequently, an investor should have a reputation for fulfilling promises in order for groups to even remotely consider a proposal that includes long-term commitments.

While some foreign investors do have this reputation (even if unjustly earned) and are successful in capitalizing on it, others do not, and as a result they are seen as less trustworthy. The first major blow to the reputation of the United States among fighters in civil wars came when the United States failed to provide promised visas to local military servicemen who fought alongside U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Subsequently, the United States slowly lost its positive reputation in Syria on two fronts: in the political arena due to the failed “red line” engagement and on the ground when promised weapons and equipment were routinely not delivered and financial support was delayed.⁹ The country’s failure to honor its word significantly reduced the credibility of future U.S. promises.

Russia, on the other hand, has the opposite reputation (even if it is unearned)—that of a country that helps its friends no matter what—and

⁸ Chris Hughes, “Thousands of Syrians with Horrific War Wounds Flee Across the Border for Treatment in Israel,” *Mirror*, January 21, 2016, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/thousands-syrians-horrific-war-wounds-7221386>.

⁹ Michael Weiss and Nancy A. Youssef, “Pentagon Turns Its Anti-ISIS Rebels Into Cannon Fodder,” *Daily Beast*, July 7, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/30/pentagon-turns-its-anti-isis-rebels-into-cannon-fodder>.

Russia is capitalizing on it, even in Syria. For example, when Russia started investing in rebel groups in 2016, one of its main points was, “We will support you forever. We won’t leave you on your own like your old friends did,” clearly referring to the United States.¹⁰

Groups approached by the Russians also mentioned that Russia’s credibility was the main reason they considered accepting Russian investment. Mousa Humaidi, a forty-year-old former businessman from northern Syria and a senior leader with the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, commented, “Honestly, I found that they were honest and good friends, because they support their friends. . . . Russia has more honor than America.”¹¹ And unlike other investments, such as paying salaries and building hospitals (which have relatively quick payoffs), maintaining a good reputation is trouble enough, but rebuilding a tarnished reputation takes years, if not decades, of concerted, consistent effort and hard work.

Foreign Fighters

Even if a group is supported by a strong investor who is providing it with technology and knowledge, it could still benefit from having foreigners for propaganda reasons—to show local fighters that the cause of the war is popular even abroad, and because foreign fighters are also dedicated and often willing to take more risks in operations than their local counterparts. As a result, they could be more effective on the battlefield.

However, groups need to have a plan in place for screening and managing foreign fighters. They need to make sure they are getting only the most useful fighters with goals and grievances similar to those of their local brothers-in-arms. This will ensure that they can work together toward the group’s goal.

Groups should not try to integrate foreigners and locals. Instead, foreigners should be allowed to segregate into semi-independent subgroups with their own leadership, funding, and organization and interact with locals only on the battlefield. Not only is it less expensive for the group, but

¹⁰ Mike Giglio, “Russia Is Recruiting the U.S.’s Rebel Allies In Syria,” *BuzzFeed*, June 9, 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/russia-is-recruiting-the-uss-rebel-allies-in-syria?utm_term=.puqggL78Y#.cin55vyXG.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

it also reduces the chances of a coup, ensures that any foreign spies do not have access to sensitive information about group organization and leadership, and reduces potential problems with the local population.

Increasing the Quality of Local Human Resources

After the group becomes popular among fighters, investors and group leaders need to ask themselves if their military goal and strategies require (and their budget allows for) a large or small group composed solely of the most dedicated and qualified fighters. Even if they opt for the first route, the group should start small and first increase its reputation so that it can later increase the supply of qualified labor.

And even if the applicants are few, a group has to screen prospective fighters. In particular, group leaders need to make sure that fighters are qualified, willing to fight for the goal, and loyal to the group. Without screening, less dedicated individuals might be able to join the group, and this could destroy group cohesion and make it hard to prevent those fighters from looting, among other counterproductive activities.

While qualifications can be easily checked, other criteria are much more difficult to verify. However, Islamist groups in Syria were successful in screening applicants, so it is not impossible. To solve this problem, the investor and group leaders need to impose additional costs for those who wish to participate in the group. Such additional costs can be uncomplicated in nature but must also be costly and visible.

Listening to Fighters

In many cases, investors force a particular decision on a group without taking into account opinions, particularly on the political matters of the fighters. This could be a fatal mistake in a highly competitive market where fighters could simply switch to another group. This was a case in Syria during the early stage of negotiations in 2014. Due to international pressure, pro-Western armed groups leaders were forced to attend negotiations in Geneva, yet their rank-and-file soldiers were against it. In the survey, 89 percent of active fighters said their group “should continue fighting without any negotiations.” As a result, many fighters switched to

more radical groups that made it explicit that they refused to participate in negotiations.

If a group has foreigners in its ranks, group leadership should keep in mind that, because foreigners who came to the battlefield despite the risks and dangers involved are more dedicated to fighting than their local brothers-in-arms, they are less likely to agree to any type of negotiations or ceasefire, which could lead to internal conflict.

Looking Forward

It is still possible for a civil war to end with the victory of a pro-Western force, although with each new conflict this becomes harder and harder to achieve. If help comes at the right time, in the right amount, and to the right group, there is a chance a moderate group might achieve a monopoly on the rebellion, or at least take the lead and become powerful enough to challenge the enemy. But even if that never comes to pass, if a single group wins the organizational competition within the rebel bloc, it could increase the chances of successful peace negotiations. First, if one group significantly increases its power, most other groups in the multifaction rebel camp, including more radical ones, will disband and disappear. Second, the group will be able to persuade its members that there are no options other than to accept the settlement. Third, the group could enforce whatever settlement emerges from negotiations on other groups still left inside the rebel camp.

At the same time, if supporting armed groups in the civil wars is not taken seriously, with each new conflict, the gap in human resources between Western-backed groups and other groups will widen and it will be harder to catch up, never mind outcompete them. As a result, while now the West can still rely on its technological superiority to win against radical armed groups, with increasing experience and quality of radical armed groups' human resources, the technology gap could decrease, making the task of defeating radical groups in the future even harder.

It is also important to remember that, as I have mentioned in previous chapters, ideology plays only an insignificant role in the goals of groups that claim to be radical. Not only does their purported ideology have little (if any) effect on their goals and strategy, but groups must work very hard to maintain balance by ridding themselves of the radicals within their ranks.

And if such infighting does not ultimately destroy the group from inside, it is possible to assume that, in the long run, leadership will follow the opinion of the majority of their group members—who, in the Syrian civil war, were the same local people who first participated in peaceful, pro-democracy demonstrations.

Other Conflicts and Ideologies

After the Mosul operation, I attended a Pentagon-organized conference where I heard the commander of U.S. Central Command, Gen. Joseph Votel, speak. He talked about how the United States was helping local armed forces defeat the bad guys in the Middle East. It was not entirely clear, however, who the “bad guys” actually were. It reminded me of a time when I almost published an article about Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) using homemade tools to make coalition airstrikes less precise, but I decided against it. When I explained this decision to my main former ISIS source Ali, a foreign fighter from the Caucasus, he agreed: “It is probably the right decision [not to publish] because the bad guys could read it and also start using this method.” He—a former ISIS foreign fighter and ultra-radical chain *takfiri* Salafi Wahabbi—was also concerned about bad guys but was not able to articulate who they were. And even a harder question was how those bad guys are different from the good guys, and what part ideology played in determining those roles.

In war, the farther down in the ranks and politics of an organization you move, the more similar the experiences and behavior of the individuals—namely the fighters—become. After individuals choose whom they want to fight against, based on their individual goals and grievances, and what organization they want to be part of, based on which organization will better help them reach their goals or act on their grievances, their everyday experiences and choices in combat become largely identical, making them more like the *same* guys. And this is true not only among the different groups in the rebel bloc, but even across the frontline. Almost everyone’s behavior and experience is largely formed by his role as an armed fighter in a particular organizational framework, not the goal his group claims to be fighting for or the ideology that group uses to justify its grab for power and territory. And this is something that is often forgotten in the discussion of armed organizations and their manpower, especially in relation to often intentionally dehumanized enemy forces. So with this book, I hoped to show that to reach a lasting peace, it is important to look beyond the phrase “enemy fighters” and understand that they are individuals with their

goals and grievances who operate in a framework of a particular organization that simply has different ideology-colored rules that control them, whether it be armed groups with Shia Islam ideology or those claiming to fight for democracy.

In the Eastern European town where Ali now lives, there is a park dedicated to World War II, a war against an organization that tried to gain power under the banner of Nazi ideology. During that war, both of our grandfathers had served and died under the banner of communist ideology. As Ali and I walked there, comparing our recent combat experiences under the banners of Islamist and democratic ideologies respectively, we unexpectedly found our combat experiences and our reactions to them almost identical.

I told him that when my Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF) unit was targeted by an enemy sniper, we ran into the nearest building to hide while preparing an explosive to neutralize him, which we did. Three minutes later, we exited the building and there, lying in the entrance, was a civilian shot in the head. I had been the last person in before the civilian was killed. For the next three days, I was too scared to even think about what could have happened. Ali told me how, during battles, the fear was so paralyzing that his body physically refused to participate in anything dangerous. He had become extremely sleepy, and instead of doing something to help the fight, he would pray and wait for death.

A conversation about one car crash I was in brought us into a deeper understanding between the similarities of opposing sides. Once, while riding with two ISOF officers from one Mosul base to another, we barely escaped a head-on collision with a civilian humanitarian convoy. We were traveling at a very high speed. At the last second, the driver made the right decision to sacrifice us instead. Our armored Humvee flew off the road, spinning in several circles, but because it was very heavy, it did not flip. When the driver regained consciousness, we all started praying, even me. And although I am not Muslim (or religious), *Shahada* (There is no God but Allah, and Muhamad is his messenger) was the only wording that came to my mind at that point after spending almost a year in Arabic-speaking Muslim country. This had upset Ali, a radical Sunni.

“I knew you considered yourself Shia!” he said, referring to my being in Mosul with mostly Shia armed forces. “Have you been to their Ashura [Shia religious] gathering in Karbala?”

“I don’t consider myself Shia, and I have never been to Ashura. I actually wanted to go but could not find anyone in ISOF to go with me.”

Ali was surprised by this. “They are all radical Shia. On TV, I saw Imam Ali [a religious figure important to Shia] flags all over Mosul. What do you mean they don’t go to Ashura?”

For the next half-hour, I found myself filling Ali in on my research, but instead of talking about Sunni armed groups, I used examples of Shia Islam. Yes, ISOF troops had those Imam Ali flags on Humvees, but that did not even mean all the fighters inside the vehicle were Shia; sometimes the flags were used simply to distinguish similar black Humvees from each other. One ISOF fighter I knew of claimed to convert from Sunni to Shia with no marked difference in behavior; he had not prayed as a Sunni Muslim and did not pray as a Shia Muslim, either. And after the liberation of Mosul, my ISOF friends and I went to Kurdistan to celebrate just so the military leadership would not know they were drinking. Following the same logic, the leaders was drinking in Kurdistan so their solders would not find out.

“Your local guys were just like ours in ISIS,” commented Ali, whose biggest disappointment in ISIS was that locals did not live up to his dream of a utopian Islamic state. Exactly. There were even radical, nonofficial armed groups bothering locals with Shia radicalism, just like chain *takfiri* in ISIS had; Baghdad leadership just did a better job of controlling them. On several occasions I witnessed ISOF Shia officers ordering members of Shia radical militias to turn off their loud, identifiably Shia, music so as not to antagonize civilians in Sunni Mosul. And since I often wore a hijab to hide my blonde hair (especially from enemy snipers), some officers asked me who in their ranks ordered me to wear it so they could punish that person, thus signaling their own dedication to the Western democratic values their group claimed to be fighting for (although later, in private conversations, they expressed their belief that women should wear headscarves).

Ali complained about members of ISIS Amni who would do anything to avoid exposing themselves to dangers on the frontline. On the ISOF side, during the last (and most dangerous) part of the operation for the Old City of Mosul, there was a shortage of officers on the frontline due to the intensity of combat. It seems politics came into play so some officers with influence could avoid being sent there. Why? They all knew

a fighter's death, most of the time, was not as glorious as the portrait painted in ISIS propaganda videos or the heroic descriptions relayed in postmortem award ceremonies; death was random or defined by God—depending on which ideology you looked at it through—and many wanted no part in it.

It seemed that in this so-called religious war, the only difference was that the majority of ISIS locals did not care about radical Sunni Islam, and on the other side of the frontline, locals did not care about radical Shia Islam. Instead, the main goal of the majority of fighters once they got to the frontline was simply to survive, and they used all possible means within the frame of their respective organization to do so.

“So why were you in Mosul with Shia forces, then?” asked Ali.

“For my research. I wanted to get experience in combat and understand how it works,” I explained.

“But why ISOF?” Ali asked.

I shrugged. “Well, in the battle for Mosul, ISOF was the most professional (trained by U.S. special forces) and best-organized and -supplied group, and they agreed to take me with them and make sure I didn't get killed.”

“You should have come to our side,” he replied. “Our guys were also well trained by the best guys with Waziristan experience, and no group in Syria had more than we did. And coming to us would have been totally safe. Our guys would have protected you.”

Because he knew ISIS from the inside—the only military organization he had ever known—he knew how to navigate it and, as a result, how to be safe in it. “As long as you were not a spy and followed [ideology-colored] rules—did not declare *takfir* on Baghdadi and always stayed with a male guardian—you would have been absolutely fine,” he commented.

I knew he was right. In fact, I was officially invited by ISIS Russian-speaking leadership to visit Raqqa as a journalist, but my gender made it a little complicated because they were not able to figure out how to “sell” having a female journalist to their group members. Basically, they had not invented an ideological explanation for it yet.

On the other side, I had felt safe with ISOF only because I knew how to navigate that organization, basically by following the similar rules. In addition to the obvious one of not being a spy for the enemy, I had to express support for pro-Western democratic values. So when Mosul fell, I had advised Ali to tell his comrades not to be afraid for their foreign women to surrender to ISOF. Apparently their biggest concern was that the ISIS

foreign women would be raped if they surrendered, a claim that sounded absolutely ridiculous to me, a Russian female living with ISOF soldiers for a year, but logical for him because he basically projected his group's policies onto the other side. Their armed organizations framed their behavior as fighters, but in their everyday lives, the fighters were still human, however inhumane they might seem to their enemies.

Because most fighters were young males, there was a lot of showing off on all sides. Although not allowed to mingle with females in public, members of al-Nusra were always on their phones chatting with them (at some point an al-Nusra Russian-speaking group member was sending me pictures of cats and flowers from Idlib every morning). Members of ISOF loved to host female journalists coming to cover the conflict and show them around, sometimes despite explicit prohibition from the leadership.

The opinion of a wider male audience was also important to group members. ISOF officers in combat-support roles often posed for photos with sophisticated military equipment, such as sniper rifles, they had borrowed from their colleagues on the frontline and then would post the pictures on Facebook as “proof” of their role in the conflict. Instead of Facebook, ISIS fighters gathered in mosques and local bazaars—real places where everyone could see them—with their weapons. “To walk around the town,” Ali said, “I bought an M16 and, in a special shop in Mosul, modified it to look like an M4 because the M4 is cooler. After modifications, it was really not a good weapon because it was not precise, but it did not really matter since I did not need to use it.” He had an AK47 for actual fighting.

When the presence of U.S. armed forces in Mosul was no longer covert, the trade of ISIS paraphernalia/souvenirs flourished. Because the majority of U.S. military personnel were not on the frontline but still wanted to make such an impression back home, they approached ISOF fighters about buying black ISIS flags. Since ISOF fighters saw no other use for those flags, which were in abundance in Mosul, they were as eager to sell as the U.S. soldiers were to buy—at \$250 each.

Ali recalled a very similar story about how he got a suicide belt. “A friend from an assault unit needed money, so he was selling his suicide belt. I did not need a suicide belt that much, but since he needed money, I bought it for \$150. Then it sat, collecting dust on my shelf.”

I asked if he considered wearing it.

“Of course not. It weighs 1.5 kg [3.3 lbs],” he replied.

I totally understood. When academic colleagues concerned about the ethics of my fieldwork ask if I carried a weapon on the frontline, my first thought is, an M4 weighs 9 lbs! Who would voluntarily carry something that heavy if they did not absolutely have to? That is the same reason neither ISOF nor ISIS soldiers ever wore bulletproof vests. And even though these fighters rationalized this dangerous behavior as either being brave or looking to go to heaven (again depending on the organization's ideology), the truth was much more banal: Who wants to carry all that extra weight in 43°C (110°F) heat?

There are things fighters care about in their everyday lives that are the same as not just their enemies but as every other human, which is completely unexpected to people who see them only as fighters. Even when indicative of their ideology, it does not change what makes fighters all human and, in so many ways, the same. As Ali said:

We had so many birds on our *makars* [bases]. We even had big colorful parrots. Refugees left their pets behind. So what could we do? We took them in. I personally had a pet chicken, and when I lived in Tal Afar, I got a cat. One night it was very cold, and she froze outside, so when we found her, she was almost dead. There was no veterinarian in town, so we did CPR on her. Fortunately she survived, but lost her tail and ears to frostbite. Also, this is the only right thing to do because the Prophet loved animals and cats in particular.

I recalled how we had many doves in our safe house in East Mosul. Because their civilian owners had cut their wings, they could not fly and, as a result, were not able to find food. The soldiers found an old wardrobe and carried it to the third floor of our safe house, and we used it as birdhouse. ISIS paper documents not needed by military intelligence provided good insulation. And one ISOF commander even had a big Belgian Shepherd, a strange pet in the not-usually-dog-friendly Middle East but very easily justified by the pro-Western ideology of the ISOF force, especially since the dog was called "Hero."

While having this conversation, Ali and I had left the memorial park and did not notice we were walking in the bicycle lane. Since it was a weekend night, a drunk bicycle driver almost hit us, then stopped to start an impolite and offensive argument. Ali could not tolerate his behavior, but because of his background and illegal status, it would not have been wise for him to

get into a fight, so I took the lead in defending us. Now Ali and I were on the same side, absolutely confident in each other's combat experience and eager to stand by each other against our common enemy. Most importantly, at least at that moment, it was clear to us who the true bad guy was, and we could easily come up with an ideological justification of the conflict that suited both of us later if needed.

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